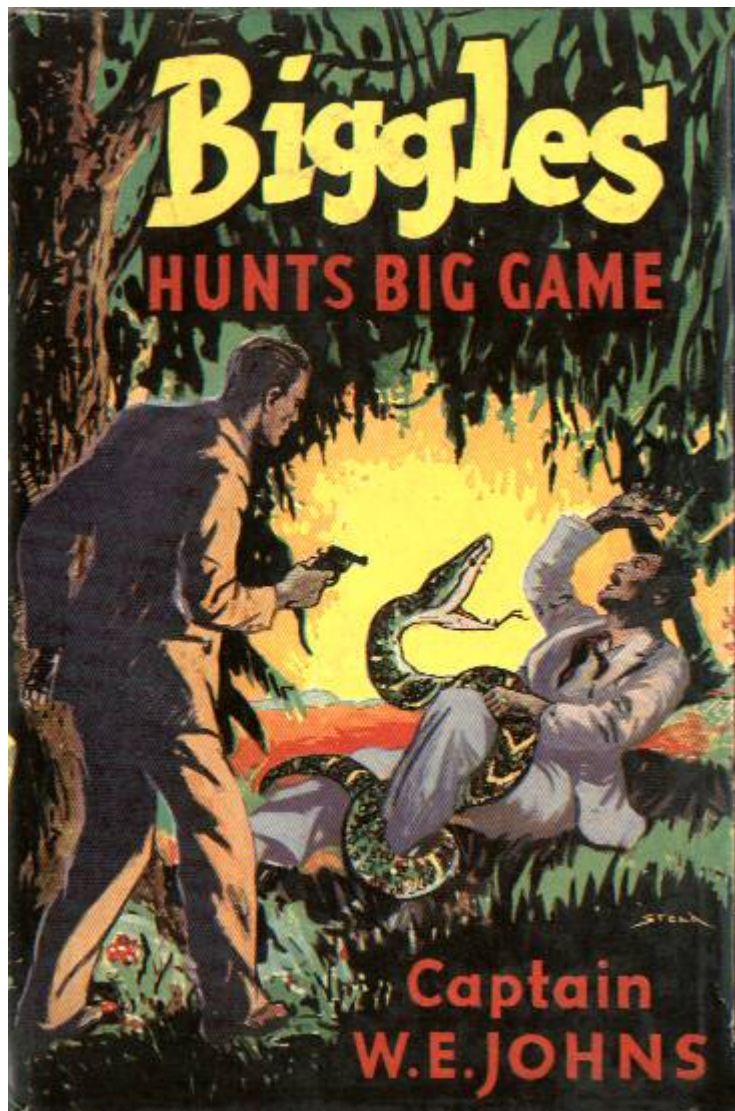


# Biggles

HUNTS BIG GAME



Captain  
W.E. JOHNS



## Chapter 1

### Biggles States The Case

"WHAT'S the idea? Don't tell me that you've started collecting stamps!"

"

The question was asked by Constable Hebblethwaite (more often known as "Ginger" to his comrades of the Special Air Police Department of Scotland Yard) from the sitting-room door of the Mount Street apartments which he shared with his chief, Sergeant Bigglesworth, 'D.S.O., D.F.C., M.C., one time of the Royal Air Force. It

was prompted by the spectacle which greeted his eyes as he entered the room after a spell of duty at the Yard—a spectacle which nearly caused his voice to crack with incredulity.

The scene would not by ordinary standards have been judged remarkable. It was remarkable only in that Ginger, in all the years that he had known his chief, had never seen him reveal more interest in a postage stamp than was required to stick it on an envelope. Yet now, from a number that lay on the table, he had selected one which, held by a pair of tweezers, was the subject of close scrutiny through a magnifying glass.

Ginger turned to Constables Algy Lacey and Lord Bertie Lissie who, having come home with him were hanging their hats on the rack in the hall. "Take a look at this," he invited, with an inclination of his head to what was going on at the table.

page 10

Bertie, still limping from the bullet wound in the thigh sustained in the affair of the stolen German proto-type,[1]

screwed a monocle in his eye and regarded the picture with wonder and affected alarm. "Well, blow me down!" he exclaimed. Advancing into the room he continued, "Here, I say, old boy, go easy. If that bally stamp collecting bug gets its teeth into you our happy days of fun and frolic will be over—absolutely finished. You'll spend the rest of your life trotting round looking for little bits of paper in the hope that one of them might turn out to be a tuppenny Blue Mauritius."

"Did you say days of fun and frolic?" inquired Biggles with biting sarcasm.

"Well-er-fun, anyway—if you see what I mean?" Biggles laid the magnifying glass on the table. "It may interest you to know that I've always wanted to collect stamps. As a kid at school it was a secret passion with me. I was saving up my pocket-money to start collecting when some perisher started a war, and I haven't had a chance since. Stamps are more interesting than most pieces of paper ten times their size. Besides teaching you more geography than an atlas they're pretty to look at. I'm getting browned off rushing round the world without getting anywhere, particularly since we got roped into this detective business; one day, when the brass-hats turf me out to graze on a pension, I'm going in for stamps in a big way."

"Then you haven't started yet?" Algy asked the question.

Biggles sighed. "Not yet."

"Then what's all this? " Algy pointed to the stamps that lay on the table.

[1] See Sergeant Bigglesworth, C.I.D.

page 11

"Oh, that's another story," said Biggles sadly.

"When did it happen?"

"This morning. Shut the door and pull up some chairs. I shall have to tell you about it sometime so it might as well be now. It's a depressing tale." Biggles lit a cigarette while he was waiting.

When the others had gathered round, selecting a stamp from those on the table he held it up and continued, "This stamp, valued at one franc fifty centimes, was issued by the government of France." He dropped the stamp and picked up another. "This one, to all appearances identical, is an imposter. It was fabricated by unauthorised persons at some place unknown."

"In other words, it's a fudge," put in Ginger. "

"It is, and yet it isn't," returned Biggles. "A fudge is an imperfect copy of an original, imperfect because, as the materials of which official issues are composed are kept secret, there is a difference, even though it is not apparent at first glance. In this case there is no difference. The paper is the same as that on which the government issues are printed. The design is the same; the chemical constituents of the gum and the ink are the same. In short, if a number of these stamps, genuine and spurious, were mixed, no one could sort them out again—unless he had a keen sense of smell. The bogus stamps have a queer odour hanging to them—a sort of musty smell mixed up with moth-balls. To the stamp collector this may be a matter of small importance, but for the French government it is very serious. It means that the Post Office is being swindled out of its revenues, the sum lost being in proportion to the number of dud stamps put into circulation. Such perfect reproductions as these would certainly be put out in large page 12

numbers, which means that France is every day losing a considerable sum of money. And that state of affairs will go on until the illegal printing press is discovered."

"In other words, a gang of clever counterfeiterers are at work in France?" put in Algy.

"Counterfeiterers are certainly at work, but where the work is being done is a question not so easy to answer," replied Biggles. "Forget the stamps for a moment and look at this." Emptying the contents of an envelope on the table he selected a small piece of paper almost entirely covered with a design printed in mauve ink. "You probably know what this is."

Ginger grinned. "It's a ten bob note. I had one once."

"The Treasury would be happy to give you quite a lot if you could tell them who produced that particular specimen.

Like the stamps it is spurious. Yet such a perfect copy is it of the real thing that even the experts at the Bank of England are not infallible when they try to separate the false from the true. The paper is perfect. So is the ink. Of course, all governments that issue notes know perfectly well that they will be counterfeited to a more or less extent.

There are always a number of dud notes in circulation, even in this country. Most of them come from abroad, where people are not so familiar with their appearance. They are passed in this country at places where large numbers of notes are constantly changing hands—race meetings and so on. The majority of these forgeries are easy to detect, and when they reach the banks they are of course destroyed. This is a menace that has long been accepted. They are an irritation rather than a danger to the monetary system. But when counterfeit notes reach the perfection of this example that I have here on the table it can only

page 13

mean that forgery is being practised in a big way, and that is a serious matter. A country must know, and be able to state at any time, just how many notes it has in circulation. If it can't, then it's on the road to inflation and bankruptcy.

Its trade begins to decline, because other countries, naturally, would view its transactions with suspicion. Confidence is lost. Presently shopkeepers get chary of accepting notes. The result is chaos." Biggles stubbed his cigarette.

"This morning I was called to a special meeting in Whitehall" he resumed. "Every government department of importance was

represented. I went with Air Commodore Raymond, Assistant Commissioner of Police, representing Scotland Yard. The conference was convened to discuss a situation which has been developing slowly since the First World War. A lot of people have seen the trouble coming, although the newspapers have kept the soft pedal on it for security reasons."

"You mean the Black Market?" suggested Algy.

"Pah! That's merely a side issue."

"Tell us what it was about," invited Bertie. "It sounds exciting."

"So exciting that, unless the trouble is checked, it will bust civilization as effectively as would indiscriminate bombing with atomic bombs," declared Biggles seriously. "Some years ago, when certain writers of fiction first introduced into their crime novels a sort of king crook, a paramount chief of the underworld, the plots were generally regarded as entertaining but improbable flights of fancy. Yet that very thing has not only come to pass, but has far outstripped in scale and scope anything that these far-seeing writers visualized. Of course, petty crime still exists, as it always has page 14

existed and no doubt always will; but that is something that can be kept within reasonable limits by the police."

"There are people who assert that modern science will ultimately wipe out crime," put in Ginger.

Biggles shook his head. "Forget it. Such observations are wishful thinking. What those who make them overlook is this: modern science helps the update criminal just as much as it does the police. Devices that can be used by one can be used by the other. There is nothing to prevent crime from keeping pace with police methods. Indeed, there are signs that the crooks are ahead of the police."

"Why should that be?" demanded Algy.

"It doesn't take much working out," answered Biggles gloomily. "In the first place, modern conditions are responsible for the trouble. What with one thing and another a lot of people are getting browned off, with the result that an increasing number are not as honest as they were—to put it nicely. Two world wars have nearly caused the earth to seize up on its axis. We were talking of science. What have scientists done to help matters? They've been so busy producing lethal weapons that they've forgotten how to do the simple things—like

providing food to feed the people.

The man in the street doesn't want atomic bombs. He wants bread and butter. The world has gone cockeyed and he knows it. He also knows there is nothing he can do about it. Tomorrow, he says, some clueless [2] sabre-rattler will start another war, or, maybe, set loose a bunch of irritated atoms that will send the whole universe up in a cloud of dust and small pebbles.

[2] To be clueless, or "without a clue" is R.A.F. slang, implying that the person referred to is mentally defective.

page 15

Result? He shrugs his shoulders and says. 'What's the use of working? What's the use of doing anything? Let's go out and play games.' "

Bertie nodded. "What you mean is, the whole bally world is round the bend? [3]

Biggles smiled faintly. "That's what it's coming to.

The trouble is, people in the frame of mind I have described are easily steered into crooked practices by sharpers with an eye to the main chance." He glanced round the faces of his listeners. "Sorry if I appear to moralise, but you asked for it. As representatives of law and order, and particularly in view of the job now in front of us, we've got to face these murky facts." He lit another cigarette and continued.

" Apart from the ordinary people you have all the loose ends of society cut off by the wars—people, big people some of them, who have lost everything in the flare-up that has just swept this ball of mud on which we are living. No matter whose fault it was, these people are resentful of the disasters that have brought them to the gutter. They have no intention of playing at paupers while there is a hope of recovering the way of life to which they have been accustomed.

They don't care how they get money as long as they get it. Then there are hundreds of Nazis, Fascists and Japanese warrmongers who, apart from material gain, are out for revenge. On top of all these, if the papers are to be believed, there are thousands of deserters from military service, of all nationalities, floating loose. These people are not—or were not—professional crooks; but they are now ready for a career of swindling—anything if it means easy money.



From the police angle, to deal with professional crooks is one thing, but this new problem

[3] "Round the bend." R.A.F. slang meaning slightly mad.

page 16

is a very different matter. Take these notes as a case in point. At the top of the tree behind that racket is no tuppenny-hapenny sharper. He's a big man. The small fry can't give him away for it's unlikely that they know him by sight or by name. If one of them gets caught it doesn't matter two hoots to the Big Boss, who is the brains behind the organization.

Expert legal advice would be available: In any case, who is going to convict a man for uttering false notes when they are as perfect as this? Anybody could be fooled. Suppose I was caught changing such a note? I should plead ignorance

—that I did not know it was a dud; which would be true. Yet the profits of this racket must be enormous. Yes, it's certainly a sticky problem for the police. Sorry to be so long-winded, but if we're to have a hand in the business we might as well get the picture clear from the start."

"It isn't a very pretty one, if you get my meaning," murmured Bertie.

"Our business is to see things as they are, not blink at them through rose-tinted glasses," answered Biggles evenly.

"Look at the facilities that are open to the crooks. There was a time when crooks were mere footpads, cheap swindlers, house-breakers and the like, each man working for himself in the hope of picking up a little easy money. They still exist, but they don't matter; the police can take care of them. In the end they hurt themselves most of all. But the conditions which I have been at pains to describe have brought into being a new type of crook—men with brains and capital to back their projects. They do not think in pounds, or even hundreds of pounds. They start with thousands and their goal is millions, and the power that millions brings. There's no limit. And once embarked page 17

on such a programme there's no stopping. They can't stop even if they want to, for around them are their lieutenants and the rank and file of their organizations, all dependent on them for a livelihood. As the bank balances grow so does the organization grow. The bribes they are able to offer are such that men normally honest are tempted to



leave the decent ways of life which, by the machinations of the crooks, are made ever more difficult to follow. Play with us and grow rich, say the crooks. Play against us and we will bust you wide open. And that is no idle threat. The gang becomes an octopus with arms radiating out from the central brain. To cut off one arm does little good. The others continue to flourish and nourish the creature. The only way such a beast can be killed is by giving it the iron straight between the eyes. To destroy the thing you must destroy the brain. But how is that to be done when not even the arms know where the brain is hidden? Be sure that the brain keeps well in the background. It knows how to protect itself.

An organization such as the one we must now try to visualize has its spies everywhere, in the highest places as well as the lowest. They warn the brain of danger every time the law moves in the right direction. As I said just now, once this state of affairs comes into being any discoveries that science may make are at once available to the crooks as well as to the forces of law and order." Again Biggles stubbed his cigarette with thoughtful deliberation.

"Take, for example, our own line of business—aviation," he continued. "There was a time, not so long ago, when a rogue was bound to confine his activities to one area because fast transportation did not exist. If he was in a hurry he had to ride a horse. In the last

page 18

generation he might charter a special train, but even then there was little chance of his getting out of the country. Then came the motor car. Did that make things easier for the police? To some extent perhaps, but the real advantage lay with the crook. It took him swiftly to the scene of operations and got him away afterwards. Fast transportation has always been the crook's best friend. Today, in an aircraft, he can get anywhere in the world in a few hours. There are no frontiers in the sky, no barricades, nothing to stop him from hitting the breeze in any direction, with practically no limit to range or speed. With this power in his hands it is inevitable that the modern master-crook should think on international rather than on national lines. He can make his headquarters where he likes, and from there strike in any direction. He needs no passport, any more than we needed passports when we were dropping into enemy territory during the war; and the crook is, after all, at war with civilization. Consider these stamps and notes for example. The printing presses might be anywhere; on a Pacific island or deep in the heart of the Amazon

jungle; on an oasis in the Sahara or within the Arctic Circle. With air transportation the lines of communication to and from such places wouldn't mean a thing .. The more you think about it the more you will realize what sort of job the police are going to have to track them down."

"If every country co-operated, Radar would spot a strange machine, or a machine flying over a course for which no commercial purpose could be found," opined Algy.

"Perhaps. Then what? The gangsters would hardly be so foolish as to fly direct between their hideout and the objective. These fake notes, for instance, might

page 20

have been printed in Borneo, flown to Arabia, taken by camel caravan to Persia, and then flown again to some lonely spot in the Highlands of Scotland. Their ultimate distribution would of course be handled by a different organization.

On the other hand, the whole racket might be done by a concern that is apparently a genuine air operating company.

Where big money is concerned anything is possible. It is of course on account of the aviation angle that we have been put on the job. The modern crook spends big money, and must therefore play for big stakes. Private bank balances do not interest him—they are mere chicken feed. The bigger the organization gets the more money it must have. The more money it has the bigger it grows, so we get a vicious circle."

"Like the booze racketeers in America in prohibition days?" put in Ginger.

"They were perhaps a milestone in the development of wholesale crime, but at the best they were only gangs of rough-and-tumble thugs who did their work through terrorism at the pistol point. Where such gangs might commit a single murder the criminal brains trusts of today would destroy a thousand lives in a revolution if it suited them."

"You think these super-crooks do really exist, then? " asked Algy.

"The government has decided that there must be at least one such gang," replied Biggles. "These counterfeit notes and stamps, they say, are proof of it. Such perfect workmanship could only have been

arrived at by an enormous outlay of money. The paper, the ink and the gums, are secret, guarded by state officials. How did the crooks get them? By bribery. Officials—in this country at least—are not easily bribed. A page 21

threat, one which the Nazis were fond of using, might have done the trick. Blackmail. The business of introducing the faked notes and stamps into the respective countries could have been no easy matter either, yet it has been done.

Doubtless there are other rackets, emanating from the same source, although so far they haven't been spotted.

Obviously, if this gang can turn out postage stamps and Treasury notes it can produce other things—clothing coupons, food cards, and so on. The whole world is open to it. There's an interesting paragraph in today's paper that might have a bearing on our case. Listen to this." Biggles reached for the Daily Express and read:

"Twenty six million pounds in "dud" notes made in Germany. Forged notes with a face value of twenty six million pounds have been found at Freising, Germany, in twenty three cases .... Ex-prisoners at a factory at Badischl admitted that seven printing machines and two photographic machines were in use.' "

He laid the paper aside. "Similar printing presses might have been installed anywhere. It is pretty certain that the gang is working on international lines. What other countries are doing about it I don't know."

"What are we doing, if it comes to that?" inquired Ginger.

Biggles shrugged. "The position at the moment, as far as we are concerned, is this. The government, naturally, has detailed the Yard to protect British interests both at home and abroad. The Commissioner assigned the job to Raymond who, being of opinion that aircraft form the mainspring of the business, pushed the thing on to me—or perhaps I should say, to us. As usual he has given us a free hand—not that it would be any use starting on a job of this size any other way. We

page 22

can do what we like, go where we like, and spend what we like within reason."

"And where are we going to start?" asked Ginger, a suspicion of sarcasm in his voice.

"That," answered Biggles frankly, "is what I was wondering when you came in. I haven't been idle."

"Does that mean you've got a plan?"

"I would hardly call it a plan," demurred Biggles. "Call it an idea. We've got to ..."

He broke off abruptly as there came a knock on the door, then raised a finger for silence. "I wasn't expecting a visitor," he said softly. "This looks a bit like a conference. Bertie, Ginger, perhaps you wouldn't mind marking time in the bedroom for a little while. It'll make less of a crowd." He waited until the door had half-closed behind them, then called, "Come in!"

The hall door opened and a man stood on the threshold. With movements that were slow and deliberate he took a pace into the room, transferred a bowler hat which he held in his right hand to his left, already holding a furled umbrella, and closed the door behind him. This done he turned again to face the room.

## Chapter 2

### The Velvet Glove

THROUGH the crack of the bedroom door Ginger regarded the visitor with a curiosity that may have been justifiable in the circumstances. Not that there was anything unusual about him. On the contrary, he was page 23

a typical prosperous-looking business man, with a confident bearing and shrewd appraising eyes; a type common enough in London. His age might have been in the early fifties, although his hair and the heavy moustache he wore showed no signs of grey. They were in fact so black that, considered with a dark complexion, Ginger formed the opinion that while the man might be a British subject his ancestry was foreign—possibly a Latin from South America, or the Mediterranean seaboard. He was well-built although rather inclined to corpulency, suggesting that he spent more time at the table than at exercise. His general air of well-being was supported by the quality of his clothes; both the material and the cut of the dark lounge suit he wore were good. His linen was spotless, but a foreign touch revealed itself again

in tightly-fitting patent-leather shoes, such as few Britishers would wear except with evening kit.

Biggles was the first to speak. "Whom did you wish to see?" he inquired.

"Bigglesworth—Squadron Leader Bigglesworth of the R.A.F., or Sergeant Bigglesworth of the C.I.D., I don't care which." A fleeting smile crossed the sallow face. "I guess I'm talking to him right now?"

The phraseology, Ginger noted, suggested that the man had been in America for some time, even if he were not an American citizen.

"Quite right," answered Biggles. "I'm Bigglesworth. Won't you sit down?"

The visitor found a chair, rested his umbrella across his knees and balanced the bowler hat on top. He glanced from Biggles to Algy and back to Biggles, raising his eyebrows.

"This is Mr. Lacey, a friend of mine," said Biggles

page 24

quietly. "You can speak freely in front of him. Go ahead."

"I've come to see you--" began the man, but Biggles stopped him.

"I always like to know who I'm talking to," he interrupted gently.

"The name's Robinson—John Robinson," was the smooth and ready reply, in a tone of voice that caused Ginger to suspect that not only was the name an assumed one, but the speaker intended that to be realized.

"Thank you," murmured Biggles. "Now we'll get on with the business that brought you here."

"I'm the British representative of an air operating company. We—"

"Just a minute. What's the name of this company?" interposed Biggles.

"At the moment the company is only in process of formation," was the glib reply. "Let us for the sake of argument call it Universal Airlines Limited. I am now engaged in getting together the administrative staff. I thought you might be interested."



The name's Robinson—John Robinson

(see p. 24)

"In what way?"

"Aviation is your business. You might care to come in with us."

"That's very nice of you, but it happens that I'm already employed," said Biggles evenly.

"Yes, I understand that. Naturally I would check up on a man before

offering him a job."

"Then why come to me when there are plenty of good pilots looking for work?"

"They haven't all had your experience and they haven't all got your reputation."

"Reputation for what?"

"Getting places."

page 25

"I see. Thank you for the compliment, Mr. Robinson but I'm not—"

"Just a minute. I haven't finished yet."

"Sorry." ...

"You were going to say you didn't want the job I had in mind for you?"

"Quite right."

The visitor looked reproachful. "You'd turn it down before hearing what salary I was prepared to offer?"

"I don't think that would interest me."

"Wouldn't ten thousand a year interest you?"

Biggles' eyebrows went up. "It would if I thought I could justify it—honestly—which I doubt."

"Maybe you reckon it's too much?"

"It would be an all-time high record for a mere operational pilot," averred Biggles drily. "Purely as a matter of curiosity, what should I be expected to do to earn that amount of money?" His eyes were on the visitor's face.

"You'd act in an advisory capacity, chiefly. Your salary would be in the nature of a retaining fee."

"Ah, to stop me from working for anyone else?"

"Put it that way if you like. Most people work for one concern at a



time, I believe."

"Exactly," murmured Biggles. "I happen to be working for a concern now."

"Then you aren't interested in promotion ? .

"Not particularly. I'm more concerned with doing what I want to do."

"Money's useful."

"I discovered that quite a long time ago."

" Then why not help yourself to some?"

" I haven't done so badly."

page 26

The visitor hesitated for the first time. "Suppose we stop beating about the bush?" he suggested.

Biggles shrugged. "You started the beating—not me."

"Okay. Perhaps you'd like to name your own price? "

"That's a dangerous offer."

"There's no hurry about your answer. Take a little time to think it over."

"There are some things that don't need thinking over and this is one of them."

"You'd rather go on with the mug's game you've just been asked to play?"

"Who said I'd just been asked to play a mug's game?"

"Oh, we folks who get around hear things, you know," said the man who called himself Robinson airily.

"We hear a few things, too," Biggles pointed out softly.

Again the visitor hesitated. He sighed. "Well it seems a pity," he said sadly. "You've got a great record behind you.

Why spoil it?"

"I've no intention of spoiling it."

Robinson held out a hand in a deprecatory gesture. "Where's it got you? Where's it getting you?"

"Surely that's my worry?" answered Biggles curtly. "There s no need for you to saturate your pillow with tears on my account. I've had my fair slice of life."

"What you mean is, you've let other people play wIth your life to fill their pockets, not yours. What have they given you? A medal or two, worth half a crown."

" I'm not complaining."

page 27

"What's going to happen to you when you get too old for this risky game you've been playing for the last twenty years?"

Oh yes, we know what you've done. We know you're the sort of man who really wins the wars for the people who make 'em. We know all that, and I'm serious when I say that we should be sorry to see you hurt yourself just when you ought to be sitting back and taking things easy. Why not take care of your future?"

"I've managed to do that so far."

The visitor shook his head and stood up. "Well, have it your own way. I'm sorry we can't do business together. It was just an idea. Had it come off it would have been to our mutual advantage."

Biggles also rose. "It was nice of you to call, Mr. Robinson. I appreciate your generosity. Yours must be a very wealthy company."

"We aren't short of money."

Biggles smiled faintly. "As it happens, neither am I. We may meet again in the course of our respective jobs."

"It could be."

Biggles opened the door. "Good day, Mr. Robinson."

"Good day to you, and thanks for listening to my proposition. Oh, by

the way, I nearly forgot." The visitor felt in his breast pocket and took out an envelope which he handed to Biggles.

"What's this?" inquired Biggles, who looked surprised.

"Why not open it and see?"

In dead silence Biggles slit the envelope and withdrew the contents. It was a crisp, crackling banknote for one thousand pounds. "What's this for?" he asked slowly.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Call it a little token of our appreciation of what you've done for the country."

"Then it's mine?"

"Absolutely."

"To do what I like with?"

"Of course."

"I shall find it useful."

"That's what I thought."

Quite quietly Biggles folded the note into a spill.

Walking over to the fire he lighted one end and lit a cigarette.

Robinson watched this with dark, brooding eyes.

The muscles of his face tightened. "So that's the best use you can put it to, eh?"

"This sort of money—yes."

"Maybe you've lit a bigger fire with it than you know. Watch out you don't get burnt."

"I'll watch it," promised Biggles.

Suddenly, and surprisingly Ginger thought, Robinson's manner changed. His face creased into smiles of what appeared to be genuine amusement. He laughed. "Well, fair's fair," he declared. "I said the note was yours. No hard feelings, I hope? Have a cigar." He offered an open cigar case.

Biggles took one. "Thanks," he murmured. "A cigar is a cigar in these hard times."

Robinson had flicked a gold petrol lighter and offered the flame.

"No, I won't light it now," said Biggles casually. "A smoke like this is worthy of an occasion. I shall enjoy it better after dinner."

Robinson closed his lighter and slipped it into a waistcoat pocket. "You know best," he averred. "There's plenty more where that one came from, remember."

page 29

"I shan't forget."

"Well, I shall have to be getting along. Good day."

"Good day." Biggles closed the door. For a minute he stood listening to footsteps descending the stairs, then he hurried to the window that overlooked the street.

The others joined him. As Ginger looked down he saw an expensive limousine glide across the road, a uniformed chauffeur at the wheel. He tried to see the number plate, but from his elevated position the letters and number were foreshortened.

Biggles was evidently thinking on the same lines, for he said sharply: "Ginger, slip down and get the number of that car. We may want it one day."

Ginger ran down the stairs. Hurriedly throwing open the front door he nearly collided with a man, a rough type of workman, who was standing on the pavement. His only conspicuous feature was a cast in one eye which made it difficult to determine the precise direction in which he was interested.

"Why don't you look where you're goin'?" snarled the man angrily, as Ginger tried to get past.

Ginger had to make several attempts to get clear before he succeeded, and by that time the car was lost in the traffic far down the street. Annoyed, feeling that he had been frustrated, he turned to give the man who had baulked him a piece of his mind; but the man was striding down the pavement, lighting a cigarette. Realising that there

was nothing he could do about it Ginger went back up the stairs and told Biggles what had happened.

Biggles did not seem surprised. He helped himself to a cigarette from the box on the table and then looked at the others. "You see what I mean?" he said softly.

page 30

"Remember what I told you about the big crooks having a spy system of their own? You've just seen a nice example of it. This morning we were given an assignment, perhaps the most important one we've had yet. Within a few hours here is a fellow at our door offering me a bribe to sell my employer and join his side. That's what it amounted to, of course. Genuine companies can't afford to pay their pilots ten thousand a year. I know that as well as anybody—and Robinson knew that I knew it. If the size of that bribe is any indication then it looks as if the biggest gang of all time is at work. They know the police are taking action. Although I was only given the job this morning their intelligence service has reported it to headquarters. Before the day is out their representative is here with a fat bribe to check our activities. True, he offered us the velvet glove, but the iron fist was inside it."

"Really? I didn't notice it," murmured Bertie.

"I'll show it to you," returned Biggles. "Ginger, slip into the bathroom and bring me an old razor blade."

Ginger went out and returned with the instrument.

Biggles took it from him, sat down at the table and reached for the cigar that Robinson had left. In silence, with great care he slit the cigar from end to end and folded the two halves back. Neatly encased in the centre was a minute glass tube. It was no thicker than a matchstick and about half as long.

Nobody spoke for a full five seconds. Then Ginger said: "What is it, do you suppose?"

"An explosive of some kind I imagine," answered Biggles evenly. "Probably fulminate of mercury, or something of the sort. Be sure that whatever it is, the charge, had I lit the cigar, would have been sufficient to blow my head off."

Biggles pushed the cigar aside.

"We'll dispose of that presently." He looked up. "I suppose in a way we've been paid a compliment. I wouldn't flatter myself by going so far as to say that the gang is afraid of us, but they've as good as admitted that they'd rather have us on their side than against them. They'll be back, of course, particularly, now they know beyond all doubt that we've been assigned the job of rounding them up."

"You think they know that definitely, then?" put in Ginger.

Biggles indicated the postage stamps, the note and the magnifying glass, which still lay on the table. "Robinson would hardly fail to notice those," he said drily. "He would know why they are here."

"You should have covered them up."

Biggles collected the papers into a heap: "It makes no difference. Robinson knew of our assignment or he wouldn't have come here."

"Seems a pity that you had to chuck a thousand jolly old quidlets down the drain," sighed Bertie. "It gave me a severe pain in the neck to watch that beautiful note burn to ashes."

"Oh—that." Biggles smiled. "It was merely a little act, a childish one perhaps, to demonstrate to the worthy Mr.

Robinson our complete indifference to money. I thought it might annoy him to the extent of showing his hand more plainly. It did. He gave me a cigar which, had I smoked it, would have put me beyond the need of money for all time.

That was only a try-out on his part. I can't think that he seriously expected me to fall for such an elementary trick.

When I didn't light the cigar he knew that the trick had failed. I didn't want his dirty money, but I didn't see why I should give it back to him when it could be put to

better use. So before burning it I memorized the number. I'll write to the Bank of England saying that the note was burned, and put in a claim. After the statutory period has elapsed without the note turning up they'll pay over the cash, and we'll pass it on to St. Dunstan's. Without knowing where it came from they'll make good use of it, I'll

warrant."

"It might have been a dud," suggested Ginger. Biggles shook his head. "Oh no. That one was genuine enough. There's no purpose in a faked bribe; It would do more harm than good."

"You sly old fox," murmured Bertie.

The corners of Biggles' mouth twitched. "It's a sad thing to grow old without learning a thing or two."

Algy was still looking at the cigar and its deadly charge. It seemed to worry him. "If they know we're here, and what we're doing, they won't just let it go at that," he observed. "We'd better start looking for another home before they come back with bigger and better cigars."

Biggles nodded. "If I think you've got something there," he agreed. But flitting may not be as simple as it sounds. From now on this house will be watched. For their own security the enemy will have to know where we are. If we leave here they'll see us go. Still, there may be a way of showing them our tail-skid before they can bring their guns to bear. I'll think it over. Then we'll start to get organized."

"What exactly do you mean by organized?" inquired Ginger.

"Well, talking of gangs, I seem to remember that during the war we had quite a useful all-round gang ourselves. We might do worse than get it together

page 33

again. In fact, I could find a use for one of the gang right now."

"Which one?"

"Tug Carrington. He was, you may remember, handy with what he called his 'dukes'. He rang me up the other day for a gossip about old times—I forgot to mention it. He's taking up his old business of professional boxing. He's in training for the middleweight championship, living in lodgings near Blackfriars Ring."

"What's he doing for money in the meantime?" asked Algy.

"He's running a taxi."

"His own?"



"Yes."

"Where did he get it?"

"As a matter of fact, if you must know, I fixed it up for him—a sort of temporary loan."

"Ah-huh. That's what I thought," murmured Ginger softly.

"And for what purpose could you use Tug right now?" asked Algy.

Biggles was standing by the window, looking down at the street through a muslin curtain. "A newspaper seller has taken up a pitch about fifty yards along on the opposite side of the road. I don't remember having seen him before."

"What about it?" asked Bertie.

"Nothing, except that he's in a nice position to watch our front door."

"Aren't you getting a trifle suspicious?" queried Algy.

"From now on, even though we sometimes make mistakes, we've got to be suspicious of everybody."

"But we were only given this assignment today."

page 34

"And the people we are to track down are already aware of it. They aren't going to let grass grow under their feet. The fact that we've had a visitor makes it clear that they are not going to wait for us to kick off when it suits us. They've started the ball rolling, and they'll keep it rolling while they think there is a chance that we may get in their way."

Ginger joined Biggles at the curtain. "Why, that's the fellow who got in my way when I tried to take the number of Robinson's car!" he cried.

Biggles nodded, his eyes still on the newsvendor. "I thought his arrival on the scene at this particular moment was stretching the arm of coincidence a bit far. You'll notice he's sitting on a box. Surely that's unusual? Most people in his line of business stand up. Of course, he may merely be tired; or he may feel that as he's likely to be here for a long spell he might as well make himself comfortable. On the other hand there may be something in that box that concerns us."

"What could be in the box?" asked Ginger curiously.

Biggles shrugged. "Guessing is usually futile, but if I was asked to guess I'd say that it could be a radio, so that he could let his boss know when we go out."

"Here, I say, old boy, that's going rather far—if you see what I mean?" protested Bertie. "Newspaper men aren't radio operators."

"You seem to forget that the fellow down there selling papers isn't a newspaper man. The papers provide the necessary excuse for being there."

"Of course—silly ass that I am," muttered Bertie.

"You were talking just now of Tug," reminded Algy. "Where does he come into the picture?"

page 35

"I've always had a marked objection to being watched," answered Biggles. "It offends my vanity. I've been accustomed for so long to settling arguments with guns that I've forgotten how to use my hands. Besides, I dislike hurting my knuckles. Tug seems to know of a way of hitting people without hurting himself. It struck me that he was just the sort of chap to—discourage, shall we say—this specious seller of newspapers without putting us all into the dock on a charge of homicide. I'll have a word with him. Incidentally, it must be getting on for tea time. Ginger you might see about getting some sent in. It's likely that we shall be busy presently."

Biggles crossed to the telephone, picked up the receiver and dialled a number.

## Chapter 3

### Tug Taxis In

In a couple of minutes Biggles was speaking to Tug Carrington, one time a flying officer in No. 666 (Fighter) Squadron, R.A.F., more often known in the Service as Biggles' Squadron. Those in the room could of course only hear one end of the conversation, but as Biggles did most of the talking they were able without difficulty to follow the gist of it.

"Listen, Tug," began Biggles. "Are you free at the moment? You are?"

Good. I want you to do a little job for me. I'm speaking from home. Yes, the others are here with me, listening. Now, this is the position.

page 36

We've bumped into what promises to be a sticky proposition. The enemy has posted a man outside my house to watch us. I find that sort of thing rather tiresome. Unfortunately, being more or less respectable police officers we can't do anything about it. There's no law against watching, and if we did what we feel like doing we ourselves should be breaking the law ... exactly. That's where you come in. I want you to bring your cab along in one hour from now with the petrol tank topped up ready for a longish run. The fellow watching us is selling newspapers, but that's only an excuse for being there. When you stop outside our door I think it's likely that he'll come over to have a good look at you. If he doesn't—well, you can go over to him. Either way, your job is to put him out of the picture for a little while. How you do it is your business—as long as you don't kill the fellow. You will then drive us away. We shall be standing by with our kits packed ready to move off. Is that clear? Fine. We shall expect you at six o'clock precisely.

The time is now four-fifty. Yes, I'll tell you all about it later on. That's all for now. See you presently. So long."

Biggles hung up.

Half turning from the instrument he remarked:

"Tug says this is exactly what the doctor ordered. He's pulled a muscle in his calf and has had to layoff training for a while. It seems to have peeved him. His temper isn't exactly what you would call placid at the best of times—but you know what he's like when anything annoys him. Unless I've missed my guess, our snooping friend over there on the pavement is due to collide with what he may think is a stray atomic bomb." Biggles turned back to the telephone and dialled another number.

page 37

"Why are you calling the Yard?" asked Ginger, who was watching.

"I shall have to tell the Air Commodore what we are doing," returned Biggles.

After a brief delay he was through. "Bigglesworth here, sir," he

reported. "We've decided to move to operational quarters ... yes, I know it's a bit sudden, but we've already had a visitor. He thought he was in a Woolworth Store and tried to buy us ... offered quite a lot of money, too. When I turned him down he presented me with a cigar with a squib in it. It means that too many people know what we're doing, so we've decided to amble away while the going's good.

The enemy has planted an observation post outside, but we can deal with that. The airfield I should like to use is Delmar, in Hertfordshire. The service has closed down there leaving only a care and maintenance party. That will suit us fine. There are machines there we can use while we're getting our own equipment organized. There should be petrol and surface transport available should we need it. Communications with London, both by radio and private wire, should still be functioning. If that's okay with you I'd like you to make the necessary arrangements with the Air Ministry. For the time being they will have to take us on their strength for rations. How long shall we be there? I've no idea, sir. Things are already moving so it may not be for long. That's fine. We'll keep in touch with you as far as possible, but don't let it worry you if we fade out for a while. Yes ... yes ... right you are, sir. Good—bye." Biggles hung up.

"Well, that's that," he observed turning again to the others. "Raymond says he'll do the necessary."

page 38

"Then we push off for Delmar at six, in Tug's cab? " queried Algy.

"That's the idea. Pack up. We shall travel light, the lighter the better, so a bag apiece will have to do."

At this juncture tea was brought in. Chairs were pulled to the table.

"This will probably be our last meal here for some time," remarked Biggles.

"You mentioned just now that you had a plan—or rather, an idea?" prompted Ginger. "How about letting us in on it?"

Biggles sipped his tea. "We are only supposed to cover the air angle of this business," he said thoughtfully. "If there is no air angle then we drop out of it; but Raymond is convinced that air transportation is the mainspring of the racket, and I must say that I agree with him. It's hard to see how the thing could be done by surface craft. The first

thing I did therefore, when I got home from the conference, was to sit down and do some serious thinking, turning over in my mind all the gossip I have heard recently about aviation generally. Next, I condensed all the possibilities into three simple sections. This is how I worked it out. Number one. The racket might be worked by unregistered aircraft creeping about, possibly after dark. Number two. One of the proper air transport companies might be used by the gang

—without the knowledge of the company officials, of course. Number three. The establishment of a special air line by the crooks, ostensibly operating for the public, but in reality working for themselves. Number one seemed the most likely. Number two I didn't care for, because knowing how tight the customs regulations are I couldn't see how the crooks could get

page 39

away with it—certainly not for any length of time. Number three was, I thought, ambitious, but bearing in mind the size of the racket, well within the bounds of possibility. Having got my lists settled I rang up Crasher Doyle at Air Intelligence and asked him if he had had any reports of unofficial flights, or unidentified aircraft snooping round the coast. He said no. Moreover, he was quite definite about it. Apparently radar is still in operation, and he assured me that no strange aircraft could get in or out of the country without being spotted and monitored. That practically disposed of number one on the list. I passed over number two because I thought it was the least likely, which left me with number three. To examine this would I thought be a long and tedious task, but it turned out to be easier than I expected. You might well say, how could an operating company, running on crooked lines, continue to function without being found out? The answer to that is, until today no one has had any reason to suppose that anything underhand was going on. Even now the man in the street would hardly know where to look for signs of funny business.

But aviation happens to be our job. We've run a charter service of our own, so we know from practical experience what can and what cannot be done, what is commercially possible and what is not."

"Robinson said his people were running an airline," reminded Ginger.

"I know, and it may be true; but it would be foolish to put any reliance in statements made by the enemy," replied Biggles. "I had already turned the beam on that possibility before Robinson came. I decided

that if these crooks are running their own air line then it must have been started fairly recently. According to page 40

the Air Trades Directory, during the past twelve months eleven new air transportation companies have been registered.

Five were sponsored by the governments of the countries concerned, so we can rule those out. Of the remaining six, two are subsidiaries of old established shipping lines, and another is owned by a railway company. Those can be crossed off, too. That leaves us with three. One is Air Freight Limited, of which our old friend Wilks is a director. He wouldn't stand for any shady business, so that one goes out, leaving two. Of these, one operates only in the southern hemisphere, so by the time-honoured process of elimination we find ourselves with one name on our list." Biggles paused to pour himself another cup of tea.

"This last company is a concern called Stellar Skyways Incorporated," he continued. "It's no ordinary company. Indeed an examination of its activities reveals so many unusual features that I doubt if I shall have time to go into them in detail now. Curiously enough, it had already aroused my interest, and the other day I did a little checking up when, for the third time recently, I had occasion to make an entry in its docket in the air reference library which we are keeping at the Yard. Raymond asked me to start one, you remember. Mind you, none of these items would have any special significance in the ordinary way; but it's part of our business to keep an eye on everything that happens in aviation.

The first item introduces an old friend of ours, Johnny Crisp. I ran into him in Piccadilly about a month ago. He was out of a job. He told me he had been working for a show called Stellar Skyways, but had given it up. When I asked him why, he growled and

page 41

said, 'It stinks.' Just what he meant by that I don't know; he was in a hurry and I hadn't time to ask him. Item number two was a report which appeared in the papers about three weeks ago. There was a paragraph to the effect that Brigadier-General Sir Henry Carding had been killed by a lion whilst on a big game hunting trip in Central Africa. He had, the report concluded, been a member of a tour conducted by Stellar Skyways. I'll come back to this tour business later on. Item number three was a rather curious business. You may remember it. The thing happened about three months ago. A machine

belonging to Stellar Skyways crashed during a sandstorm somewhere in Upper Egypt. There were a pilot and two passengers on board. The pilot was unhurt but the two passengers were killed. But the queer part of the business was this. The crash was first reported by some natives who said the machine was down in the desert.

It had not caught fire. British Overseas Airways sent a relief machine down from Khartoum. When it reached the spot, some twenty-four hours after the crash, the machine was burnt out. The two passengers were also burnt. The wreckage was still smoking. It was obvious to the R.O.A.C. pilot that the machine must have caught fire a good while after the crash, which is unusual but not impossible. In fact, the Stellar pilot admitted it at the subsequent inquiry. His explanation as to why his passengers were still inside sounded a bit lame, but again, it might have been true. He said that having got out, they went back into the cabin to take shelter from the sun. It was the only shade available. It struck me at the time as a bit odd that two perfectly fit men were unable to get out of the cabin before they were overtaken by the flames. However,

page 42

that was the pilot's story, and as there was no other witness it had to be accepted. So much for my personal knowledge of Stellar Skyways. All we can say is, none of these incidents reflected credit on the company. As a result of them I dug out some more facts about the show, getting most of my information from the trade papers and the company's own advertisements." Biggles glanced at his watch. "I'll tell you more about it later, when we get to Delmar. I've asked the Air Commodore to collect all the information available. Meanwhile it's a quarter to six. We'd better see about getting packed. Then we'll stand by for Tug. His arrival should be worth watching."

In ten minutes four valises were lying in the hall.

Final arrangements for departure were made, after which, Biggles, with the others beside him, took up a position at the window overlooking the street. The seller of newspapers was still there, at the same place, selling an occasional paper when accosted; but for the most part he seemed content to sit on his box, a rough deal case about two feet square which looked like an "empty" from a grocer's shop.

At six o'clock precisely a taxi cruised down the street and came to a stop under the window. The driver stepped down to the pavement. He was hatless, wore rather shabby grey flannel trousers, and a polo



sweater of the same colour under an old sports jacket. With hands thrust into his pockets, balanced on his toes, he looked up and down the street.

Biggles laughed softly. "You could pick Tug out of a million by that attitude of his," he murmured. "He reminds me somewhat of an angry terrier."

"And here, comes our snooper to sell him a paper! " exclaimed Ginger joyfully. Talk about stop-me-and-page 43

buy-one. He little knows what he's about to buy."

What followed was comic—for the spectators. For them it was over all too quickly.

"Buy a paper, guv'nor? " offered the newsvendor, flourishing a copy.

Tug dropped into a half crouch, eyeing the man with frosty hostility. He pointed an accusing finger. "Why, you're the rat who pinched my wallet the other night," he challenged.

The man looked astonished—as well he might. "That's a lie," he denied indignantly.

Tug, on his toes, took a pace forward. "So I'm a liar, am I?"

The man, sensing danger, dropped his papers and began to back away. Losing his nerve he tried to bolt, but Tug's foot shot out in a neat trip and he measured his length on the pavement. He was up instantly, but he would have done better had he stayed down. Tug's fist met his jaw with a crack that could be heard by those above. The man went down again, and this time he stayed down.

"You've had it, chum," murmured Bertie with a chuckle.

"Come on," ordered Biggles, who was watching. "It's time we were away."

They ran down the stairs, snatching up their valises in passing, and jumped into the cab. Tug was picking up something from the pavement.

"Come on, Tug," ordered Biggles crisply. "Get aboard and step on it."

Tug climbed into his seat. The engine raced. Doors slammed.

"I want to collect that box on the opposite pavement," called Biggles.

page 44

Tug swung his cab across the street, sprang out, picked up the box—which appeared to be heavier than he expected—

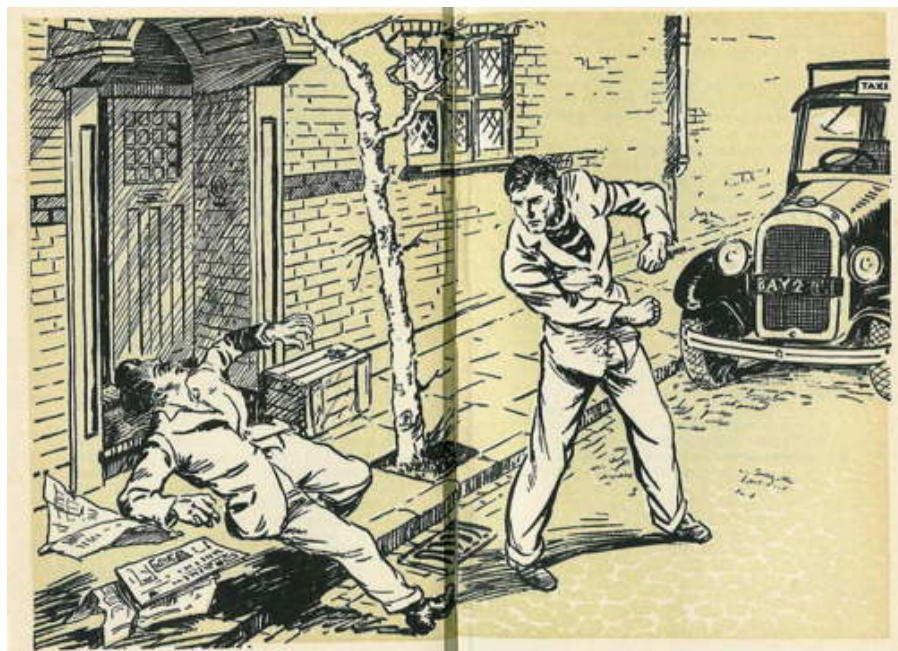
threw it into the taxi, returned to his wheel and drove on.

"Don't stop for anybody," commanded Biggles. This was no casual remark, for people were running towards the scene, including a policeman, blowing his whistle.

Tug pushed aside the glass panel between him and those behind. "Where to ? " he inquired.

"Delmar, Herts," answered Biggles. "Take the Watford by-pass."

" Okay, chief," flashed Tug. The cab shot into a side street. In fact, it dodged through several before settling down for its twenty-five mile run into the country.



After a while Tug passed through to Biggles a small but heavy object with a thick glass lens on one side. " What's this thing? " he asked.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Biggles. "Where did you get it?"

"Picked it up on the pavement. It fell off that newspaper stooge. What is it?"

"It's a camera," asserted Biggles. "The type they call the candid camera. You can carry it under your lapel, up your sleeve, anywhere you like. It was designed to take photos without the subjects being aware of it. So the newspaper man's job, or one of his jobs, was to get photos of us, no doubt for circulation amongst the gang, so that they'd know us if they saw us. Well! well! We've spoilt that little game—I hope. We'll get the film developed at Delmar in case there's anything on it. Let's see what's in the box our boss-eyed friend was sitting on."

page 45

Ginger lifted the lid. "Radio, by thunder!" he muttered.

Biggles nodded. "I'm not surprised. Remember what I told you about the modern crook being equipped with scientific devices? Now you can see it for yourself."

"What do you suppose the bouncer wanted radio for?" inquired Bertie.

"Work it out for yourself," invited Biggles. "No, to save time I'll tell you. I should say it was in order to let Robinson know about our movements as fast as we made them.

"Absolutely," agreed Bertie. "Absolutely. On this occasion at any rate the blighter didn't get a chance to use it."

"He did not, thanks to Tug," said Biggles. "By the way, Tug, what are you going to do when we get to where we are going? Are you going straight back home? "

"What would I go home for?" demanded Tug. "You mean—you'd like to stick around for a bit? " "It'd suit me better than navigating this crate in and out of the traffic."

"It's okay with me," averred Biggles.

"In which case it's okay with me," returned Tug. The taxi sped on, the polished tarmac surface of the Watford by-pass under its wheels.

## Hunters' Tour

WITHIN twenty—four hours of being briefed Ginger and Bertie were in Cairo, at the United Services' Club having left their aircraft, a standard Beaufighter, at Almaza aerodrome. They were dressed for the parts they were to play—

wide-brimmed hats, thick shirts under old tweed jackets, cord breeches, strong ankle boots and leggings. With them they had the usual equipment of the amateur big game hunter—rifles, guns, revolvers, cartridges, bandoliers, binoculars, compasses, field kit and other luggage. All these things had been plucked up at Bertie's home. They had registered as

page 59

Major Lissie and Captain Hebblethwaite, both of the Frontier Rifles, direct from India.

Having parked their kit at the Club they lost no time in setting about the task that had brought them to Egypt. The office of Stellar Skyways, they learned from the commissionaire, was at the airport, so to it they made their way, not knowing what they were going to find, but prepared for anything.

They were received in a small but well-appointed office by a swarthy, sleek-haired young man of doubtful nationality but obviously of oriental blood. He greeted them respectfully and listened to Bertie's requirements with inscrutable unsmiling eyes.

"What wish you to shoot, sirs? " he asked.

Bertie adjusted his eyeglass. "Anything—absolutely anything. The bigger the better. Rhino, hippo, buffalo—it's all the same to me. Time I shot something tougher than the mangy tigers we get in India. Feller in Quetta told me about this Jungle Tour of yours."

"You mean the Hunters' Tour, sir?"

"That's it. Hunters' Tour. Same thing—what?"

"Yes, sirs, but certainly," said the clerk suavely.

"You are lucky. We have a plane leaving in one hour if that is not too soon for you?"

"That's top hole—suit us fine."

"Shall I book two seats for you?"

"Absolutely," declared Bertie. "The luck's in, by Jove! We'll fetch our kits." He turned away, but the clerk recalled him.

"There are two small formalities first, sirs" said he in the same even tone. "I regret I must ask payment for the tickets."

"Of course. Clean forgot." Bertie took out his wallet. "How much?"

page 60

"Five hundred pounds for each ticket, sirs," was the bland request.

Bertie started. "Here, I say, that's a deuce of a lot of boodle, isn't it?"

"The charge is inclusive of travel and accommodation and we guarantee good sport."

"I should jolly well think so," muttered Bertie. "I haven't got that much in cash. I shall have to give you a cheque on my bank."

The clerk bowed. "But certainly. That is as good as money. You understand that if the cheque was not honoured you would find it a long walk back from Kudinga? "

Bertie frowned. "Don't you threaten me, my lad."

"No threat, sir, only a warning. We have to make strict rules." Actually, there was nothing in the clerk's manner to which exception could be taken.

Bertie wrote the cheque.

"And now, sirs, if you will be kind enough to complete these forms." The clerk handed out two fairly large sheets of paper.

"Here, I say, what's all this about?" demanded Bertie, after a glance at the long list of questions set out. "This is worse than the bally passport form."

"From the time our plane sets out, sirs, you will be the responsibility of the company," explained the clerk. "Also I must say that our club at Kudinga is exclusive. In the interests of our clients only the best

people are permitted to enter."

Ginger studied his form and saw that although the questions were entirely personal there were none that could not be filled in although it meant evasion. Obviously he could not give his correct address and  
page 61

occupation. After a glance at Bertie he filled in the form. Bertie did the same.

"Anyone else going on this trip?" asked Ginger as he handed back the paper.

"Yes, sir. You will have travelling companions," was the vague answer.

"Well, we'll fetch our kit along," said Ginger. "Shall we park it here? "

"In compliance with regulations it will have to be weighed, sirs."

"Quite so. All right. We'll be back."

Ginger and Bertie returned to the Club, and from the reception office sent a carefully worded cablegram to Biggles under the prearranged telegraphic address. It merely said that all was going according to plan and that they were moving on south that day. Biggles, they knew, would understand the meaning of the word south. They then collected their kits, and arrived back at the booking office having been absent nearly fifty minutes. A Pacemaker, bearing the Stellar insignia, was ticking over quietly on the tarmac. Automatically Ginger's eyes went to the registration letters, and as he read them his nerves tingled.

"Take a look," he muttered tersely to Bertie. "That's the machine shown in the photo."

"By gad! So it is."

"You realize what that means?"

"Well,—er—not exactly. Haven't thought about it."

"It isn't certain, but the chances are that the photo in Biggles' possession was exposed within the last couple of days, coming as it does immediately in front of those taken by the paper—seller in Mount Street. If that is so then it means that this machine was in England at that

time—either that or the fellow with the camera was out of the country."

Further conversation was prevented by the arrival of the booking clerk.

"Please to go aboard, sirs," he requested.. There is your plane. It is ready. Your luggage will follow immediately, as soon as it has been weighed."

Leaving the pile of luggage Bertie and Ginger strolled on to the aircraft, Ginger more than a little interested to see who their travelling companions were to be. A steward showed them to their seats. The Pacemaker was, he knew, normally an eight-seater, but he doubted If the machine would carry that number of hunters with their heavy equipment through the thin desert air.

As they sat down he saw at a glance that his supposition about the seating accommodation was correct. The seats had been rearranged and reduced to six. A small stool was provided presumably for the steward. Four of the seats were already occupied, which meant that with their arrival the aircraft was loaded to capacity. He scrutinized the passengers.

This he was easily able to do because he and Bertie occupied the two rear seats, on either side of a narrow gangway.

The inspection did not take long. Immediately in front of him was an elderly, robust man, with a sun-tanned skin, dressed in well-worn tweeds, as characteristic an example of a Britisher of the sporting type as would be possible to imagine. He was reading the Times newspaper. Ginger put him down as a senior army officer probably retired. The next two men were of a different type. One was quite young, the other middle aged. Both were dressed in dark lounge suits. There was nothing remarkable about them. At home they might have been commercial travellers. Ginger noticed the

tips of the fingers of the right hand of the younger man were stained, as if by ink, or some dark dye.

His eyes passed on to the last man, who was sprawled as though he were asleep in one of the two forward seats. A shock was in store, one



that made his nerves tingle. He had seen the man only once before, but there was no possibility of mistake. It was Robinson. He dare not speak to Bertie for fear of being overheard; he tried to catch his eye; but Bertie had settled down in his seat and looking slightly bored was watching the scene outside through the cabin window.

Ginger's brain wrestled with this new and unexpected development. So Robinson was on his way to Kudinga, he pondered. He must have started at about the same time as themselves, or as soon as possible after his unprofitable visit to Mount Street. Clearly, his business was urgent, and it might reasonably be connected with them. The link-up with the photograph showing the Stellar plane began to take shape. As he had suspected, the Pacemaker had just been to England. The photograph had been taken there. The machine had been flown straight out to Egypt and was now going on to Kudinga. It might, or might not, be the regular Hunters' Tour plane, flying to schedule. The booking clerk knew that there were spare seats in it anyway. One thing was certain. This was practical confirmation that Robinson was tied up with Stellar Skyways. It could be assumed, therefore, that Stellar was not what it purported to be.

Ginger wished desperately that he could let Biggles have this significant information right away; but there was no time for that now, for the pilot had climbed into his cockpit and was now in the act of running up his engines. The roar of them died abruptly as he throttled

page 64

back. The steward closed the cabin door and a moment later the aircraft began to move.

Ginger had caught a glimpse of the pilot as he got aboard. He was a stranger, a European, with hard, clean-cut features and fair hair. Who he was or what his nationality might be Ginger could not hazard a guess. Biggles had learned that most, if not all, of the Stellar pilots were foreigners, so presumably this fellow was one.

By this time the aircraft was in the air, levelling out for a run which Ginger had worked out from the map could not be less than eighteen hundred miles. Granting the Pacemaker a cruising speed of three hundred miles an hour in still air, that meant a six hour trip. In the event the journey occupied a trifle under that time.

Ginger knew the course fairly well. For a long time it practically

followed the Imperial Route down the Nile Valley—

Assiut, Aswan, Khartoum, and then the four hundred miles of dreary swamp known as the Sud. Somewhere near the western extremity of Abyssinia, however, the pilot swung away a little to the west, over practically sheer wilderness.

Towards the finish, though, the terrain began to change, the desert giving way to endless plains, scarred by deep depressions in which grew reeds, scrub, and occasionally timber. This, Ginger was aware, was some of the finest big game country left in Africa, and more than once he saw herds of giraffe, zebra, wildebeest and antelope, a few elephant and an occasional solitary rhino. Once he caught a glimpse of buffalo in a reed bed fringing some timber. All this was quite interesting, but he was glad when the engines were cut and the nose of the machine tilted down, indicating that the journey was nearly at an end.

During the entire trip no one had spoken. With the

page 65

exception of the elderly sportsman everyone appeared to doze or sleep. From this Ginger inferred that it was the old man's first visit, but the others had done the trip before or they could not have failed to take some interest in what lay below.

As the machine glided down Ginger surveyed the ground with renewed interest, and with a definite purpose. This, undoubtedly, would be his best opportunity for getting the lie of the land. What he saw was this: on all sides stretched undulating plains, rolling away and away to fade at last into mysterious distances. For the most part they were dry, the earth being clad only in yellowish, sun-dried grass, with here and there a tangle of flat-topped acacia trees. In a few places only were there extensive belts of forest; but there were places where small groups of trees gave the impression of English parkland. From all sides the land rose gently to a central eminence, towards which the aircraft was now gliding. This was the most conspicuous feature in a colourless panorama and its origin was apparent. It was a long extinct volcano, of no great height, but of considerable extent. The depression that had long ago been the crater could not, Ginger judged, be less than twelve miles across. The erosion of ages had rounded the contours in the manner of the Sussex Downs. Grass and scrub covered what at one time must have been naked rock, providing both food and cover for the herds of animals that occupied the region.

At one point a belt of heavy timber swept up from the plain, to run over the lip of the crater and spread down the inside, terminating in a bamboo swamp of some size. The centre of this was occupied by the only water in sight—a black, sinister-looking lake.

At no great distance from the edge of this forest,

page 66

standing in a commanding position overlooking the plains, was the only sign of human activity—the hunting lodge.

Ginger was astonished by the size of it. It comprised, not one single building, but a number of buildings, although one, presumably the lodge itself, far exceeded the others in importance. The place might have been a military depot, an impression that was enhanced by what appeared to be a surrounding stockade, or boundary fence. Two buildings only stood outside this fence. One was well down the inner slope of the crater, inside the bamboo swamp and close to the lake. The other was on the same level as the lodge, but to one side of it, and consisted of a long, low barn open on one side for its entire length. From the fact that a number of black figures were lounging about this shed for it was little more than that—Ginger took it to be, correctly as it turned out, the quarters of the natives who were employed by the company as hunters, porters, gun bearers and the like.

By the time Ginger had noted these things the machine was touching down on a level area of turf, free from obstructions, in front of the lodge. It taxied on to a double gate in the fence, which was as near as it could get to the bungalow, a matter of perhaps twenty yards, where, under a verandah, a little group of white men stood waiting. There was no permanent hangar, Ginger noticed, only a large canvas one and a mobile flood-light for night landings. The engines were switched off. The steward opened the cabin door. "Kudinga !" he called. "Your luggage will be brought to your rooms, gentlemen."

Ginger was staring in surprise at the fence that surrounded the buildings, for it was a far more formidable affair than he had supposed in the air. It was of steel

page 67

mesh wire, a good fifteen feet high, the lower part being doubly protected by fine wire netting. It gave the place the appearance of a prison camp.

"What's the idea of the fence?" he asked the steward casually. "Is it to keep us in?"

The steward smiled tolerantly. "No, sir. That's to keep the wild animals out. In the early days we had trouble with leopards getting in after the dogs. The wire netting is snake fence. There are quite a few of them about, and they're better outside than in."

Ginger concurred, warmly. The explanation was perfectly reasonable, as he was bound to admit; nevertheless as most big game hunters are content to sleep on camp beds under canvas, or even in the open, he could not help feeling that this precaution was overdone. His opinion was confirmed by the elderly man in tweeds, who had overheard the conversation.

"Lot o' nonsense," he muttered petulantly. "What do they think we are—schoolgirls? By the way, my name's Dupray—

Colonel Dupray. It's my first trip here."

Ginger and Bertie introduced themselves. By this time they were out of the machine, standing in short parched grass.

One of the men who had been waiting on the verandah came forward.

"This is Mr. Kreeze," announced the steward. "He's the manager here."  
..

Robinson, Ginger noted, as soon as he alighted, strode straight on to the bungalow without speaking to anyone. It was obvious that he knew his way about.

Ginger disliked Mr. Kreeze on sight. He was the last type of man he expected to find in such a place. There was nothing of the hale and hearty sportsman about him. On the contrary, he was a dark, rather  
page 68

pompous little man, immaculately dressed in town clothes. He might have been the manager of a big West End hotel.

What his nationality was Ginger did not attempt to guess.

"Welcome to Kudinga, gentlemen," he greeted, smoothly, in perfect English, but with a queer foreign accent. "We shall do our best to make you comfortable and ensure that you have good sport. Will you please come through to my office as there are one or two things I must

explain to you."

Like sheep following a shepherd Ginger, Bertie and Colonel Dupray, followed the manager to a small door, labelled

"Private," near the end of the bungalow. Where the other two passengers went Ginger did not see. He presumed that they were employees, not hunters.

In his office Mr. Kreeze made a short, carefully-worded speech, which he had obviously made many times before. The gist of it was this. He hoped they would be comfortable during their stay. He wanted them to make themselves at home, and at the same time help the administration by adhering strictly to rules which they would find in the visitors'

book in the lounge. They were requested to sign this book as evidence that the rules had been read. He hoped they would not find these rules irksome, but they were necessary. He pointed out that the guests were now the responsibility of the company. Every precaution for their well-being had been taken, but accidents could happen, as was proved by the lamentable case of Brigadier-General Carding, who, against rules, went out without a professional hunter and was mauled to death by a lion. They would see his grave outside. It would be noticed, went on Mr. Kreeze, that the power-plant,

page 69

down the hill, was out of bounds. The reason was, the bamboo swamp in which it was situated was infested with snakes. That was all. He was at their service should they require any further information.

For the moment Ginger and Bertie were content to retire to their quarters, for they were really tired, having lost a night's sleep during the journey out from England. A steward showed them to their rooms, which were adjoining, and there left them.

"Well, what do you make of it? " asked Bertie, who had followed Ginger into his room.

"It's a bit early to form an opinion," answered Ginger. "The outfit is phoney, of course. Robinson's presence here is proof of that. I haven't had a chance to discuss it with you but no doubt you spotted him in the plane? We shall have to let Biggles know about that right away. After that our job is to get the lowdown on the place. It shouldn't take

long."

Ginger produced his keys and reached for the suitcase containing a small but powerful radio transmitter.

The moment he felt the weight of the case his expression changed. He stared at Bertie with wide open eyes. Then, swiftly, he unlocked the case and threw back the lid. The suitcase was empty.

There was silence in the room for a full ten seconds.

Ginger looked at the outside of the case, trying to believe that the luggage had got mixed and the case was not his own, although in his heart he knew that this was not so. He looked again at Bertie.

Bertie polished his eyeglass vigorously. "Bad show," he observed.

"It's worse than that," muttered Ginger through his teeth. "We've been stung. The instrument must have been pinched in Cairo, when our stuff was being

page 70

weighed. I thought that smirking clerk was in a hurry to get his hands on our cases."

"If they found radio in our kit then we must already be under suspicion—if you see what I mean?" said Bertie.

"Yes, I see what you mean," returned Ginger bitterly. "We've got to put this right. Kreeze must know about the set being taken. He'll also know that we shall soon discover the theft. There's only one thing we can do and that's go straight to him. In any case, I'm not standing for being robbed in broad daylight," Ginger was getting angry.

"Absolutely," agreed Bertie. "Absolutely."

"You realize what this means? We're out of touch with Biggles. I can't think of any way we could make contact with him."

"We could write a letter. No doubt the aircraft carries mails when it goes back."

"Yes," agreed Ginger with bitter sarcasm. "And no doubt Kreeze reads every letter that's handed in. I'm going along to see what he has to say about this. It will look more suspicious if we let the thing pass without

commentL"

"Okay, old boy. Let's toddle along and bite his ear."

They strode back to the manager's office. Kreeze looked concerned as Ginger lodged his complaint in no uncertain terms .

"Extraordinary," murmured the manager vaguely. " I can't imagine what could have happened."

"There's nothing extraordinary about it," declared Ginger grimly. "The instrument was in my case when I handed it over for weighing at your Cairo office. It isn't there now. In other words, Mr. Kreeze, my case  
page 71

was opened on your premises in my absence and without my permission."

"I'll go into the matter," promised Kreeze. "If I find that the loss was caused by any carelessness on our part you will receive compensation in full." The manager paused for a moment and then went on, his dark eyes on Ginger's face.

"Purely as a matter of curiosity, may I ask why you burdened yourself with such a heavy piece of luggage on an expedition of this sort? "

Ginger knew this question would come, and had his answer ready. "Evidently you don't know the new regulations with regard to officers on leave outside India and the United Kingdom? We have always to be in touch with our headquarters, by radio if there is no telegraph service. in case it becomes necessary to send a recall signal. We live in troubled times, when anything can happen any day."

"If that's all, you won't need to worry," said Kreeze smoothly. "We have our own radio here, with an operator always on duty. Should you wish to send any messages you have only to say so. Should a recall signal come through for you I will let you know at once, no matter what part of the territory you may happen to be on. I take it your unit knows where you are?"

"Of course," answered Ginger without enthusiasm, "Thanks for your offer." There was nothing else he could say, but he had a feeling that he had been neatly frustrated. Without laying himself open to suspicion—if indeed suspicion was not already aroused—there was nothing more he could do.

With Bertie he returned to their quarters, to bathe, rest, and to await the next development. He had a feeling that it would not be long coming.

## Chapter 6

### Reconnaissance

By the time the day was losing its heat Ginger and Bertie had settled in. They had read the rules and had made themselves acquainted with the layout of the lodge. As far as the rules were concerned there was nothing against which objection could be taken. Actually, at their face value they had been framed more for the benefit of the guests than for the company.

As they had already been warned, the power-house was out of bounds—not that there was any reason why a guest should want to go near the place. Guests were not to go out alone, but only in charge of a professional hunter provided by the company. There were several sound reasons for such a rule. The professional hunters knew the best areas for game; they knew the boundaries of the different beats, with the result that they were able to ensure that guests did not spoil each others sport, or by accident shoot each other. It also reduced the risk of one hunter being mauled by a beast wounded by another. Beats were changed daily. Guests were requested to be home by sundown, and must at all times abide by the decisions of their hunters. Guests were not allowed in the native compound, and were forbidden to make private arrangements with the pilots of the company's aircraft for any purpose whatsoever. Arrangements for the transport of letters, parcels, and the like, could be made, but all mails and freight must pass through the company's private post office.

page 73

All this, as Bertie averred, was fair enough.

In the matter of the lodge the advertisements had not lied. The place, comparatively speaking, was a luxury hotel. The general shape was three sides of a square, the front portion being a lounge and dining-room, and the sides, the sleeping accommodation. The lounge, in which the air was kept moving by electric fans, was the last word in comfort. The walls were decorated by trophies of the chase. It was served by native waiters who could provide almost anything in the nature of refreshment. The coloured staff lived in its own quarters outside the wire.



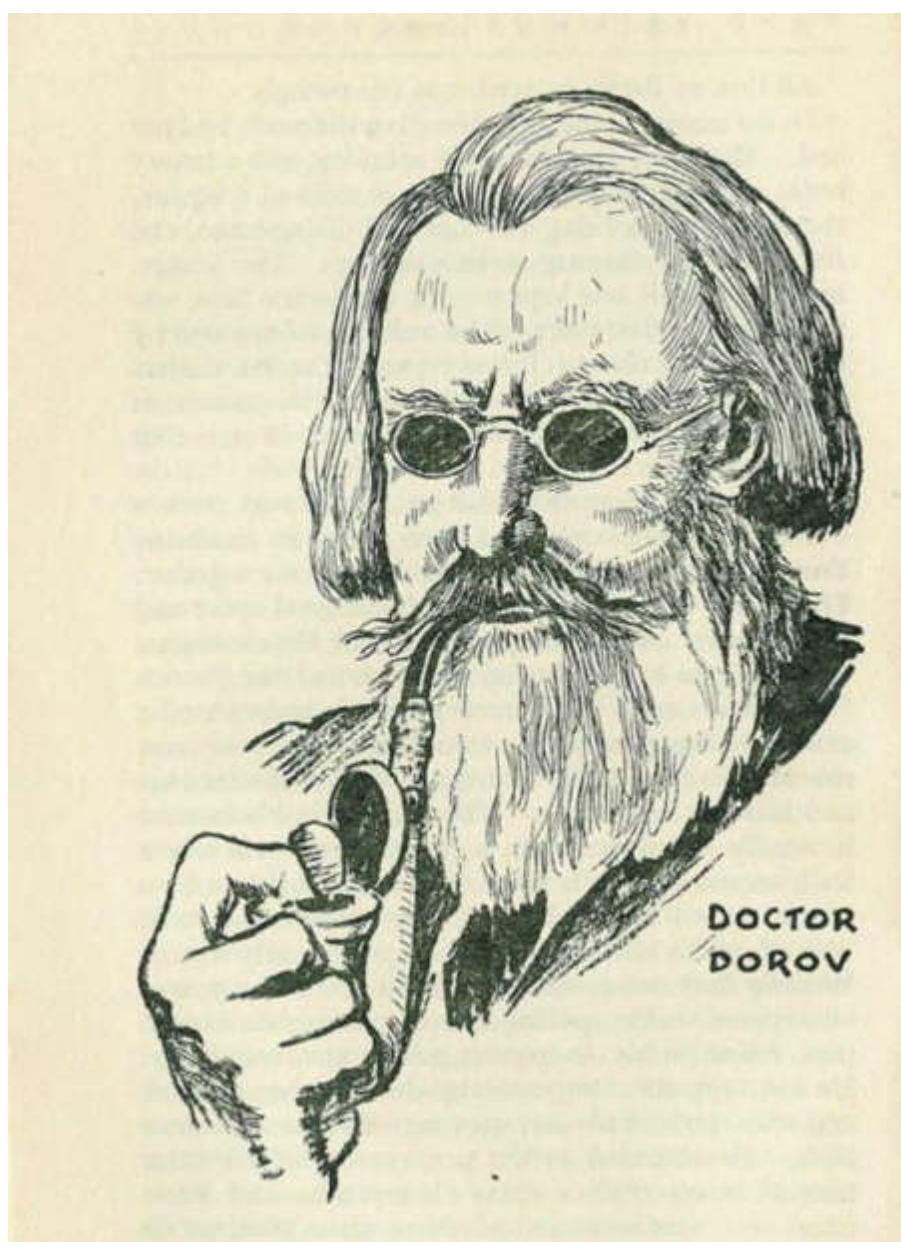
Apart from themselves, Ginger ascertained from a waiter, there were only four other guests in residence. Two were wealthy Americans who had come together. Their time was up, but they had had good sport and were staying on for a day or two. Of the remaining two one was a Frenchman, an official of the French Diplomatic Corps, a man well known in society and a celebrated big game shot. He was leaving on the morrow at the expiration of his tour, in the Pacemaker that had brought them down. The fourth guest was what is usually called in hotels, a permanency. He was a frail, eccentric, grey-bearded old man thought to be a Czech, named Doctor Dorov. He was assumed to be well off, for he had been at the lodge for nearly a year. Wearing dark sun glasses he shuffled about in a pair of old slippers, shabby, puffing at an enormous meerschaum pipe, intent on his one pursuit, which was ornithology. He had a private sitting-room in which he often worked, and where he kept his ever-growing collection of African birds. He attended to the preservation of the skins himself, wrote copious notes about them, and sometimes sent specimens home. More than once, as he

page 74 illustration

page 75

looked at him, Ginger had a feeling that he had seen the old man before somewhere; there was something in the shape of his head that reminded him of somebody, but he could not call the circumstances to mind.

The Frenchman had that day shot a magnificent buffalo; the head had been brought in by porters and was now in the taxidermist's workshop being prepared for transport home. They went with him to see it. The building stood some distance from the rest, and as he drew near Ginger understood why. The place had an unpleasant smell, although this of course was only to be expected. The big room was a veritable museum. Two men were at work. One of them told Ginger, in reply to a question about these trophies, that Kudinga served as a supply base for several famous natural



history museums. In other words, specimens shot by the company's professional hunters could be bought. There was an implication, which made Bertie frown, that if they were unlucky at their sport there would be no need for them to advertise their lack of success by going home empty-handed. The company could provide trophies.

"I wouldn't mind that one," confessed Ginger, pointing to a well-preserved elephant's foot. Taken off just above the knee and mounted

with silver it had been made up into a receptacle.

"It might be arranged," said the head taxidermist. "We will speak about it again later, just before you go. By that time you may have shot an elephant yourself."

Actually, neither Bertie nor Ginger were particularly interested in this branch of the organization, but living up to the roles they were playing they remained for a little while longer, talking. They learned that should their hunting be successful their trophies would be sent home free of charge. It was part of the service.

page 76

Naturally, in the short time at its disposal, the taxidermist's department at Kudinga could only make a temporary job.

Finishing touches and final setting-up would be done at the company's natural history department in London, Paris, or New York, as the case might demand. When they were finally completed, trophies were sent on to any address the client wished.

"We must admit that the company has got its show well organized," asserted Ginger as they strolled away. "Naturally people want to take their trophies home with them, but they've made such a big thing of this taxidermists' department that I'm beginning to wonder if there isn't more behind it than meets the eye."

Presently he stopped and gazed down the inside slope of the crater towards the bamboo swamp in which the power-plant was situated. Clearly through the soft African sunset came the beat and throb of engines. "I wonder why they put that power-plant down there?" he murmured.

"They'd have to have it well away from the bungalow or the noise of the engines would annoy people," offered Bertie.

Ginger nodded. "Maybe. The water would be down there, too, not on top of the hill. It's the fact that the place is out of bounds that interests me. If there is anything funny going on here I'd say it was in that alleged snake-infested bamboo swamp. The word snake would be enough to keep most people away. I wonder if that story of snakes is true? It might be a bluff. Sooner or later we shall have to give that place the once-over. It's going to be a ticklish job. I imagine it will have to be done at night—we should be seen in daylight."

"Here, I say, old boy, you're not going to ask me to

page 77

toddle about amongst puff-adders by moonlight, I hope? "

"We'll wrestle with the problem later," decided Ginger. "What worries me most at the moment is how we are to get this information through to Biggles."

With the daylight now fading fast they strolled on a little way down the slope, towards the bottom extremity of the fence. Here they saw another gate, a small one. A padlock was conspicuous.

"That's obviously a short cut to the power-house," observed Ginger. "I imagine Kreeze keeps the key of that gate. It's no use going any farther. You realize that when the main gate is closed at sundown we are prisoners. I wouldn't care to try to climb over that confounded fence."

"That's the idea of the bally thing, of course," said Bertie.

"No doubt of it," agreed Ginger. "I wish to goodness Biggles was here. I hate being out of touch with him. I'm trying to work the thing out as he would."

"That's all we can do," agreed Bertie moodily.

"I can imagine how interested Biggles would be in that fence," went on Ginger. "It must have cost a lot of money.

People don't spend that amount of money without good reason. Apart from the power-house I reckon the fence is the most suspicious thing here. It's the nearest thing I've seen to a Nazi concentration camp. The reasons that Kreeze gave for it are sheer eyewash. Who ever heard of a hunter putting himself inside a pen for fear of the beasts he's hunting?

Natives often pile up a thorn fence—but then they sleep rough . . . in the open. Which reminds me; I wonder how many blacks they employ at this place? Let's walk over to the fence nearest to them and have a look."

page 78

"Do they matter?" questioned Bertie.

"They matter this much," answered Ginger. "They're all servants of the company and would do what Kreeze told them.

They probably know every inch of the country, which means that we should have a poor chance of getting away on foot should we ever be compelled to attempt it. Don't forget that in the matter of transport we are now completely in Kreeze's hands. He could keep us here indefinitely if he wanted to. The tour lasts a month. Biggles is going to get impatient long before that if he doesn't hear from us. Just a minute—what goes on here?

This last remark was prompted by something that was happening a short distance away, although it was on the other side of the fence. Two natives were having an argument about something and in their anger their voices were raised.

Both were well-built men dressed native fashion. One wore a leopard skin kaross. Ginger naturally supposed that they would be talking in their native tongue, and his astonishment was great therefore, when he heard that not only were they talking English, but talking it with a strong, slangy, American accent.

"Sure I did! So what? You cheap double-crosser," snarled one."

"Okay—okay," returned the other. "We'll see what the boss has to say about it, smart guy."

The effect of this conversation was to cause Ginger to stop abruptly. It was clear that the men had not noticed them so catching Bertie by the arm he retired quickly behind some convenient bushes.

"Well, blow me down!" breathed Bertie.

"That certainly is a corker—something I didn't expect," muttered Ginger. "Those blacks are no more page 79

natives than we are. They're negroes imported from the United States. They're likely to be more dangerous than native tribesmen. This certainly puts a different complexion on things. Good thing we spotted it, but it's getting dark; we'd better be drifting along towards the lodge. I wonder what Robinson is up to? "

They had not gone far when they encountered Kreeze.

Seeing them, he walked briskly towards them, as if he had been looking for them.

"Ah! There you are, gentlemen," he said in a business-like manner. "I am just preparing the beats for tomorrow and I should like to know how you feel in the matter of exercise. Do you feel like having a strenuous day on one of the distant beats, or would you prefer to be nearer home?"

Now, while it would not be strictly true to say that Ginger had no interest in the country, his main concern lay in the real purpose of his visit. Journeys to distant parts of the territory, where he could not expect to learn anything, were therefore a waste of time. For which reason he was not long making up his mind.

"I think for the first day we'd better stay near home," he decided. "We've had a long and tiring journey getting here, and I think it would be a good thing if we got our muscles into shape before taking on the real hard going."

"I think you are wise," agreed Kreeze. "I'll make arrangements accordingly."

"We should like to do our hunting together, if it's all the same to you," suggested Ginger.

"Certainly. It makes no difference, except that you'll have to share the shooting, of course; but you probably won't mind that. If you're going together one hunter will be enough. You can have Kisumo.

page 80

He's a good man. By the way, it's nearly dinner-time." With a curt nod Kreeze walked away in the direction of his office.

Ginger and Bertie carried on towards their quarters to have a wash before dinner. In doing this they had to pass near the taxidermist's building. They had just gone by when the turning of a door handle made Ginger look back. He saw Robinson and Doctor Dorov come out. Engaged in earnest conversation they walked down a barely-discernible track towards the power-house. Doctor Dorov had lost his shuffle.

"So that's it," breathed Ginger. "It looks as if our venerable naturalist, like everything else here, is a fake. We'll bear it in mind."

They went on to the bungalow. At the door they encountered Colonel Dupray.

"Here, I say you fellows!" he exclaimed. "What's all this I hear about officers of the Indian Army having to carry radio when on leave outside the range of ordinary communications?"

Ginger experienced a sinking sensation in the stomach.

He drew a deep breath. "How did you hear about it, sir?" he inquired.

"Kreeze asked me about it."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I told him it was a lot of nonsense, of course. I'm on the General Headquarters Staff and any such order would have to go through my office."

"Must be a mistake somewhere, sir," said Ginger lamely.

"Can't imagine who'd start that silly rumour," muttered the colonel.

"Nor I, sir," said Ginger sadly.

He walked on, followed by Bertie. As soon as they

page 81

were out of earshot of the colonel he stopped, and looking Bertie in the eyes, made a grimace. "I'm afraid that's torn it," he observed quietly. "How were we to know that Dupray was Indian Army? That's sheer bad luck. If Kreeze didn't suspect us before, on account of our trying to bring radio in, he does now. Well, there's nothing we can do about it. He won't be long showing his hand, I fancy."

## Chapter 7

### Ginger Climbs A Tree

GINGER was awakened the following morning by the unmistakable noise of an aircraft being started up. It was still very early. Going to the window he saw that the sun was just rising in a crystal-clear African sky. The aircraft that had brought them down was preparing to leave. The pilot who had flown it on that occasion was there, obviously intending to take it back. The only passenger as far as Ginger could make out was the Frenchman; he was there, watching his luggage and trophies being put aboard. Presently Kreeze went out and spoke to him. They shook hands and parted, Kreeze returning to

the lodge. In another few minutes the machine was in the air, heading north. It disappeared, and silence settled over the scene.

Thinking things over Ginger dressed leisurely. Bertie joined him at breakfast. They lingered over coffee half expecting to be called to the manager's office for an explanation of the matter in which Colonel Dupray, in page 82

all innocence, they were convinced, had let them down—why they had made up the story of Indian Army officers being compelled to carry radio. However, they saw nothing of Kreeze. A steward presented them with their luncheon sandwiches neatly wrapped in paper and told them that Kisumo, their hunter, was waiting on the verandah; so they had no choice than to proceed with the roles they were playing. In view of what Kreeze now knew, that they had tried surreptitiously to bring in a radio transmitter, Ginger had an uncommfortable feeling that these roles were getting a bit thin. If they were watching Kreeze, then it was certain that he would be keeping an eye on them.

Having collected their hunting gear from their quarters they joined the hunter who was to be their guide and general adviser for the day. He turned out to be a big, surly-looking type of native African, dressed partly in native style and partly European—a mixture that is never attractive. It seemed that he was able to speak only a little English, and very broken English at that; but in view of what Ginger and Bertie had overheard the previous evening, when they had caught two of the blacks arguing, they resolved not to put too much reliance in this apparent ignorance. They would be wiser, opined Ginger, to set a guard on their tongues, taking the view that what they said would be reported to Kreeze.

For the rest, they could only accept the black at his face value; they felt sure that if he was a fraud he would sooner or later give himself away.

Kisumo began by indicating with his spear the general direction of their march. That he knew his way about was not to be doubted. Somewhat to Ginger's surprise it now transpired that their beat was inside the crater. He had assumed—not that he had any particular reason

page 83

for the assumption—that they would be going down to the plains. This



was not so. Kisumo explained haltingly that a few miles beyond the forest belt that came up over the lip of the crater, and ran down the inside as far as the bamboo swamp, there was an old river-bed, mostly dry but with stagnant pools at intervals, in which game was always to be found. There would certainly be antelope of different kinds; there might be lion, and rhino, and buffalo in the reed-beds.

They set off, taking a course round the lip of the crater to the forest-belt, which in no place was more than a mile in width—less in most places. The timber turned out to be no obstacle, for a well-worn game track took them to the far side. Bertie, who looked with the eyes of experience, saw numerous tracks in the soft earth. It was evident that there was plenty of game in the forest, but he did not need to be told that it would be a dangerous, if not impossible, place to look for it. Once they were in the heavy shade of the trees, surrounded by dark rank undergrowth, they could no longer see the lodge.

From the far side, where the timber gave way to a sunny grassy slope with frequent small outcrops of weathered grey stone, they were able to overlook the beat that had been allotted to them. It was, naturally, of considerable extent, and a good deal rougher than might have been supposed from a distance, with the ground falling away all the time towards the great central depression. The only living creature that could be seen in a preliminary survey was a rhino, standing on the edge of some scrub about two miles away. As Ginger focussed his binoculars on the beast Kisumo said that he knew the animal well. He was a wary old brute that had been shot at more than once, so it was a page 84

waste of time to try to stalk him. With his spear the native pointed to the old river-bed, which could easily be followed by the more verdant colour of its vegetation. There lay the best chance of sport, he stated, and suggested that they should make straight for it.

While the man was talking an idea had been taking shape in Ginger's mind. The scene in front of him was quite interesting in a way, but he was far more concerned with what lay behind; for the belt of trees through which they had passed was the one which, at its lower extremity, ended in the bamboo swamp in which the power-house was situated. The forest sloped down steeply inside the crater, and it seemed certain that could he be left alone he ought to have no difficulty in finding a place that commanded a near view of the area that had been put out of bounds. The powerhouse drew him like a magnet. How near it might be possible to get to it was a matter for conjecture, but his binoculars should enable him to inspect it more

closely than from any other viewpoint.

So desirable an objective did this seem that he determined to try a plan which, if it succeeded, might be profitable, and if it failed could do no harm. The difficulty was to advise Bertie of the scheme without being overheard by Kisumo, whom he did not trust. If they were seen whispering together the black might well wonder what was going on, and if his real job was to spy on them then he would at once be on the alert. Having thought the matter over Ginger resolved to proceed with the plan, trusting that a wink would be sufficient to tell Bertie all that was necessary. Consequently, when they had gone on for perhaps a quarter of a mile, he tripped over a loose piece of rock, which brought him with a cry of pain to his knees. When he

page 85

attempted to rise he caught his breath sharply, dropped his rifle, and sank back, clutching at his ankle. "That's done it,"

he muttered bitterly.

Here, I say, old boy, what's wrong?" asked Bertie with deep concern.

"I'm afraid I've twisted my ankle," Ginger told him with a wry face.

"What a bally nuisance."

Kisumo had also turned, of course. He was watching closely, too closely for Ginger to make any sort of signal to Bertie, who suggested that they had better go back.

"Nothing of the sort," argued Ginger. "You push along. I'll stay here. I shall be all right. I don't think I've done any serious damage and it might soon get all right with a rest; but if I go on walking it will probably get worse, and we might finish up with you having to carry me home."

Bertie looked doubtful. At that moment something attracted Kisumo's attention and he glanced away. This was the opportunity for which Ginger had been waiting and he did not let it slip. He flashed a wink. Bertie started; then a light of understanding dawned in his eyes.

"I'd like to get a shot if I can," he observed.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't," asserted Ginger.

"You are sure you'll be all right here for a bit?" "Right as rain. You go on with Kisumo. I'll stay here and rest; you can pick me up on the way home."

Bertie turned to Kisumo. "Is that all right with you?" he asked.

It was obvious from the expression on his face that the black was in a quandary. Here was a contingency page 86

for which he was not prepared. Whatever his instructions might have been they did not cover the case. He hesitated.

That he did not suspect a trick was clear, but plainly he was worried by the thought of having his charges separated. .

"That'll be all right, Kisumo," prompted Gmger. "I'll wait here. Make a short day of it if you like. Collect me on the way back." He smiled. "All I ask is, don't leave me here after dark."

Bertie settled the matter. "All right, but don't go away from this spot," he adjured. "We shan't be late." With that he shouldered his rifle and strode on. Kisumo followed without another word.

Ginger sat and watched them until, at a distance of about a mile, they disappeared into a dip in the ground not far from the nearest point of the river-bed. He knew that once they started hunting seriously they would not expose themselves unnecessarily, so he did not expect to see them again. Nor did he. Well satisfied with the success of his subterfuge he got up, and taking advantage of all the cover available made his way back to the forest. He expected to be away for an hour or two at the most. In any case, in order to avoid explanations that might prove embarrassing it was certainly his intention to be back well before Bertie and Kisumo returned to pick him up. That he might be prevented from doing this was a thought that did not occur to him.

Reaching the fringe of the forest he stopped, and turning round made a careful scrutiny of the area in which Bertie and Kisumo had disappeared, to confirm that they had not changed their minds and were coming back. They were not in sight, but he saw something which for a moment or two held his attention. A lion, page 87

or lioness—he was too far off to be sure which—disturbed by the hunters, had broken cover and was slinking away towards some tall elephant grass. He fully expected to hear the crack of Bertie's rifle; but the sound did not come, so he could only assume that the animal had slipped away unnoticed. Presently it disappeared from sight.

Entering the forest he at once turned downhill, the direction which was bound to take him to the bamboo swamp. Once off the track, the going, he found, was not so easy; the ground was boggy; everything was dripping wet and rather unpleasant; but he encountered no serious obstruction until he reached the first of the bamboos, when he came upon something which he had overlooked. It was the fence—or a fence. He had not realized that it went right on through the forest, to prevent an approach to the power-house from any direction.

To climb the fence was manifestly impossible. A monkey might have managed it, but nothing else. To stay where he was would not solve the problem, for what with bamboos and undergrowth he could not see more than a dozen yards.

So, for want of a better plan, he set off along the fence, hoping to find a place where the foliage was sufficiently thin for him to see the power-house. He found something better. A tree had fallen—recently, judging from the earth that clung to its roots—right across the fence, breaking it down. All he had to do was walk through the gap thus made. He smiled as he did so. For all the company's elaborate precautions they had been defeated by so simple a thing as a fallen tree. They should, he thought, have anticipated the possibility. With such satisfying thoughts as these he went on down into the bamboos.

87

Here the ground began to fall more sharply so that in places he could almost see over the tops of the green fronds in front of him and look down on the building that was his objective. Exactly how far he was away from it he did not know, for there was nothing to guide him. The engine was not running; at any rate he couldn't hear it. His chief concern was the ground under his feet, which was fast becoming a morass—although this, as he realized, was the very reason why the bamboos grew there. The bog, obviously, was caused by sub-surface water seeping down from the higher ground. The only places where the earth was at all firm was round the roots of occasional trees, a species of willow, that occurred from time to time.

Curiously enough—at least, it seemed curious to him afterwards—he forgot all about the swamp's reputation for snakes. It may be that he did not seriously believe the story. But he remembered it with a jolt, when, springing down from one piece of firm ground to another, he nearly jumped on what is perhaps the most loathsome reptile in creation, and the most deadly—the African puff—adder. It was about three feet long and as thick as a man's arm, with a blunt head from

which projected two fangs. He saw the snake just as he moved. It was lying quite still, curled up, but its little boot—button eyes were on him. He had gone too far to draw back, so with a convulsive effort he jumped clean over it. The snake struck at him in passing, its fangs missing his leg by a matter of inches. His jump must have been in the nature of a record. Landing, he did not stop, but plunged on for several yards before pulling up against a tree, white and shaken, cold with shock at the narrowness of his escape. Wiping perspiration page 89

from his forehead with a trembling hand he watched the snake glide away into some thick grass.

For a moment or two he stood there, looking about him furtively, for the encounter had put a new complexion on his venture. He tried to tell himself that the reptile was probably an odd one which might have been anywhere, for the puff-adder is fairly common all over Central Africa; but he perceived that it would be foolish indeed to deceive himself. It was far more likely that the swamp was infested with snakes for it was an ideal place for them.

Proceeding now with apprehensive caution he reached a tree, about thirty feet high, which had its roots in firm clay.

Just in front of it there had been a minor landslide which had cleared the ground and thus opened up the view beyond.

Even from his own level he could see the upper part of the power—house, no more than forty yards ahead, which was a good deal closer than he expected; and it was apparent that from the branches of the tree he would be able to see the entire building from the most advantageous angle—that is, from one side and slightly above. He started to climb the tree but finding the rifle impeded his movements, and not supposing that he would find any use for it in the tree, he propped it against the mossy trunk and in a couple of minutes was securely ensconced in a fork some fifteen feet up, a position from which, through a leafy screen, he could see his objective clearly. Indeed, no place better suited for his purpose could have been designed, and he settled down to make a thorough survey.

The power-house, as he already knew, was built of wood, but only now did he perceive how robust was its construction. In the matter of size it was some twelve or fourteen yards long by half that width. The roof page 90

was reed-thatched, covered with small mesh wire to hold the reeds secure. There were windows at intervals. Indeed, there was only one feature that caused him any surprise, and it was this. He had naturally supposed that the place was built on more or less dry land, even though it was near the edge of the small black lake that occupied the central depression of the swamp. But on looking closer he perceived that the building was constructed in two halves; that it was in fact not one building but two, although the gable ends had been fitted so snugly together that at first this was not apparent. It was fairly evident that there was a connecting door inside. The remarkable thing about the arrangement was, while one part of the building had its foundations on the bank, which had at this spot been levelled for the purpose, the other half projected over the lake. The weight was carried by a stout raft comprising four pontoons, set flush and decked over, the decking extending all round beyond the walls for a distance of about a yard, so as to form a sort of gangway. This floating part of the structure was rather in the nature of a houseboat. Three strong planks had been laid lengthways to form a connecting-link between the part that had its foundations on the shore and the end of the track that came down from the lodge. The distance between the powerhouse and the lodge, as he could now see, was about half a mile, the track being protected on both sides by a tall wire fence until it joined the main fence higher up. Here there was a gate—the one with a padlock which they had seen from the lodge grounds. The purpose of this double fence was plain enough. It prevented any unauthorized person from getting on the track, and so gaining access to the powerhouse, from any direction except the direct route

page 91

from the lodge. No doubt, pondered Ginger, it would also serve to protect those who used the path from wild animals that might lie hidden in the forest.

What Ginger could not understand was this. Why had one half of the place been built afloat, so to speak, instead of on the ground, which would have been so much easier. True, the ground was uneven and boggy, but it could with no great trouble have been levelled and drained. Ginger pondered the matter for a while, but, although he reasoned that there must have been a purpose in this, he could not work out what it was.

He watched the place for about twenty minutes without anything happening. Once he thought he saw a shadow flit across one of the windows, as if someone had moved inside; but he was not sure, and

he had just decided that the place was not then in use—a supposition that was supported by the fact that the engine was not running—when he saw Doctor Dorov coming down the path from the lodge. He was walking briskly, as if on a definite errand, carrying a small flat package in his hand. Reaching the power—house he walked across the planks, opened the door and spoke to someone inside. A voice answered. Another man joined him, and standing on the gangway took something that Dorov gave him and held it up to the light. Dorov took off his dark glasses and replaced them with ordinary ones.

To Ginger, from his distance, the object that held their attention looked like nothing so much as a photographic plate.

Quickly taking out his binoculars he focussed them on the object, but the thing was dark in colour and the magnified inspection told him nothing more.

To say that he followed these events with interest would be an understatement. He was trembling slightly from the intensity of his concentration, for he

page 92

felt that here before his eyes was the very kernel of the nut he had come to crack. The whole point would be lost though, if he could not ascertain definitely what the object was. Suddenly the man holding it retired through the door and, to Ginger's chagrin, came back without it.

But the business was not yet over. In a very short time another man appeared. He was accoutred in the manner of a precision tool mechanic; that is, he wore blue jean overalls with an eye shade as well as glasses. Ginger recognized him at once. It was the younger of the two men who had travelled to Kudinga in his plane—the fellow of the inky fingers. All his fingers, Ginger noticed, were now stained, and the stain now appeared to be wet, as if he had been interrupted at his work, whatever that might be. Dorov said something to him, whereupon he went inside and almost at once came out again holding a small piece of paper with a pair of tweezers. This Dorov examined with the greatest interest through a large magnifying glass which he took from his pocket. Again Ginger raised his binoculars. Beyond the fact that the paper had some printing on it they told him nothing. The object was small and the distance great. He had a suspicion what the object was, but suspicion was not proof, and it was proof that was needed.

So far the conversation had been meagre, and carried on in tones too low for Ginger to catch the actual words. But now Dorov laughed aloud, and spoke in a voice that was audible. But to Ginger's intense disappointment the language used was foreign, and he could not make head nor tail of it. But it made the others smile.

That was all. Dorov nodded, put on his dark glasses and set off back up the hill. The other two went back page 93

into the power-house. A minute later an engine was started. It began slowly but soon settled down to a steady rhythm.

Ginger felt that he could not complain about the results of his sortie. He had made a definite advance along the road of investigation. He was now satisfied that while the power-house might be used for its legitimate purpose it was also used for other purposes which, from the pains that had been taken to conceal them, were not so legitimate. Dorov was an imposter. He held, he felt sure, an important position in the racket. Two men at least were in the power-house.

What Ginger would like now, he reflected, was a few minutes in the power-house to see just what was going on.

However, he had done pretty well, and was satisfied with the way things were going. How to let Biggles know was the big problem. Having decided that he had seen enough to go on with he determined to return to the rendezvous without loss of time. Looking at his watch he saw, not without a twinge of anxiety, that he had already been longer than he intended. It was half past two. It would take him a good half-hour to get back. Bertie would have the sense not to hurry things, but there was no telling what Kisumo would do. Thinking things over he might become suspicious and work back to the spot where Ginger had fallen out to make sure that he was still there. Bertie, unless he flagrantly violated the rules, thus incurring grave risks, would have to abide by Kisumo's decision.

Ginger stretched his limbs, which had become cramped, and was making the first move to descend when a slight sound made him look down. He promptly received a shock as horrid, if not worse, than that caused by the puff-adder.

Standing under the tree, gazing up



at him with eyes blazing with malice, was a buffalo. It was no yearling, either, but a mighty old bull, grizzled round the muzzle with age. It did not move. It just looked, looked with a calculating sagacity that was almost human. How long the beast had been there, and where it had come from, he did not know. His attention had been focussed on the power-house to the exclusion of everything else. But it was there.

Very gently Ginger lowered himself back into his seat.

The tree had suddenly become a very frail thing. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the beast had only to lean against it to push it over, for its weight could more easily be reckoned in tons than pounds. He stared down again at the massive head with its tremendous spread of horns. It showed no signs of moving away. It was almost as though it realized that it had its victim trapped, and had only to wait.

Ginger condemned it to perdition under his breath.

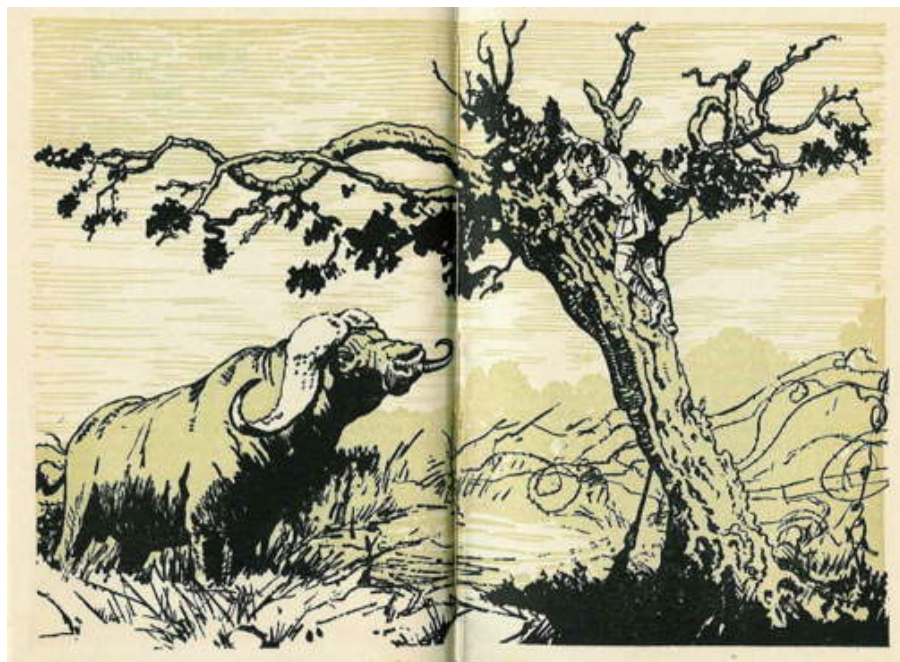
For the ordinary risks of his business he was prepared, but this was something outside them. He objected to irrelevant factors intruding into the affair. They introduced an uncontrollable element of luck—in this case bad luck. That the brute should choose this moment to appear was infuriating. Then the thought that the beast must have been in the forest all the time made him break into a cold sweat. Things might have been worse. Had he met the animal on the ground his plight would have been very much worse. He knew the African buffalo by reputation. He knew that it was regarded by most professional big game hunters as the most dangerous beast on earth. This was not so much due to its size, its strength, its speed and its ferocity, as to its almost incredible cunning and its superhuman vitality. He recalled stories of how, in a charge,

page 95

buffalo had been raked through the vitals by bullets without the bullets having the slightest effect. He also remembered that buffalo had been responsible for the deaths of more hunters than any other beast in Africa. And the animal below him was the most dangerous type of all, an old, solitary, disgruntled bull, an outcast from a herd, always looking for trouble.

His rifle, he was relieved to see, remained where he had put it, against the tree. For all the use it was, he reflected bitterly, it might as well be

on the moon. Not that he would dare to use it even if it was in his hands, for the shot would be heard not only by the people in the power-house just below, but at the lodge. If he killed the brute, which was by no means certain, he would have to explain what he was going in the forbidden zone, and that would be extremely difficult. As for the revolver which he carried in his hip pocket, he might as well use a pea shooter. The animal, no



doubt, had got inside the fence at the same place where he himself had entered. The gap that had served him so well, by an unkind twist of fate, looked like being his undoing.

What worried Ginger more than a little was this; even if the creature abandoned its vigil it would still be somewhere in the forest, so no matter how long he waited sooner or later he would have to run the gauntlet; and the beast was quite shrewd enough to watch him from cover and charge when there was no tree available. Of all the miserable predicaments he had ever been in, thought Ginger, this was the most exasperating. There was nothing he could do about it except wait. He looked down at the buffalo. The buffalo, face upturned, returned the stare with calculating hostility.

Half-an-hour passed. Ginger ate his sandwiches to kill time. They tasted like sawdust. The sun was well over its zenith, sinking fast in the western sky. The buffalo had not moved except occasionally to blow through its nostrils and paw the ground. Bertie and Kisumo would be back at the rendezvous by now, mused Ginger. What would Bertie think? He would be no more able to account for his disappearance than Kisumo. What would he do? Bertie could not very well spend the night on the open veldt. What was the alternative? What would happen if he went back to the lodge alone ?

The mosquitos began to rise in swarms, adding to Ginger's discomfiture. He heard an aircraft arrive at the lodge. This in the ordinary way would have been an event of major importance, but in the circumstances he was not interested.

One thought dominated all others. He wanted the buffalo to go, and go quickly, or all the newly—won information he had gathered was likely to be wasted.

He sat still, watching the beast below. The buffalo gazed back at him with baleful, bloodshot eyes.

## Chapter 8

### Death In The Forest

WHEN Bertie returned to the rendezvous shortly after three—thirty he was surprised to find that Ginger was not there.

He did not of course know what Ginger intended doing, although he had a pretty good idea.

page 97

Still whatever he did, he fully expected to find him at the place where he had last seen him. His failure to appear, therefore, left him nonplussed; but he was not alarmed. The difficulty was to know what to say to Kisumo. The only explanation that he could put forward—and he believed this himself—was that Ginger had gone on slowly towards home.

He was not sorry when Kisumo had suggested that they should abandon hunting and turn homewards, for all day the black had been a dull companion, as if his mind was not on what he was doing. Bertie suspected that in his heart the man was afraid of being reprimanded

should it be discovered by Kreeze that he had allowed his two white men to separate, for he had broached the subject several times, always in his limited English. Bertie had tried to trap him into using the American slang which he felt sure was his natural way of speaking; but in this he had failed. Sport had been equally dull. A lion on the skyline and a few indifferent antelope were all that had been seen. None was really worth hunting, and when in the early afternoon Kisumo had suggested that they should turn homewards he agreed without demur.

Kisumo made it obvious that he was more than a little concerned at Ginger's failure to be at the appointed place, but then, of course, he did not know what Bertie knew, or guessed; which was that the ankle accident was a ruse. Bertie was uneasy. Ginger would not, he was convinced, remain absent if it were possible for him to get back. He remembered the snakes that were said to infest the bamboo swamp, and he hoped fervently that, if this had been Ginger's objective, he had not been bitten by one.

They sat on the grass and waited for about half an

page 98

hour, without any sign of the absentee. The sun was now going down, and Bertie was forced to share Kisumo's opinion that there had been an accident. They walked on to the forest, giving an occasional hail but they might have been alone in the world for all the answer it produced. Bertie heard an aircraft in the distance. From the way the engines died he knew that it had landed at the lodge. Like Ginger in his tree who also heard it, he was not particularly interested.

As the glow of early sunset flooded the world with soft pink light Kisumo announced sullenly that they must go back to the lodge to report what had happened. Bertie suspected that the man was not so much worried about Ginger. as the reception he would get when he reported to his boss that he had lost one of his charges. Bertie, convinced that Ginger would not go back to the lodge without him, would have preferred to wait; but Kisumo would not hear of it. It was time, he insisted, that he told Mr. Kreeze, who would no doubt send out a search party. This decision Bertie was compelled to accept, although what would happen when they got back without Ginger he could not imagine.

They walked back to the lodge. Kisumo said they must go to the manager's office. Kreeze was not there so Kisumo said he would wait

for him. Bertie went for a wash, and was drying his hands when a steward appeared to tell him that Mr. Kreeze wanted him in the office.

When he arrived, one glance was enough to tell him that the incident—at least, that is what he supposed—had been taken seriously. There were present, Kreeze, Robinson, Doctor Dorov and Kisumo, and calmly smoking a cigarette, Tug Carrington. Bertie's astonishment was such that he might easily have given himself away; page 99

but he recovered in time, and turned to Kreeze who, seated at his desk, was the central figure of the gathering. It so happened that Kreeze had followed his eyes, and apparently noticed Tug for the first time.

"What are you doing here?" he asked sharply. "I told you to get some rest."

Tug said he was sorry and went out.

"You were wanting to see me, Mr. Kreeze?" prompted Bertie as the door closed behind Tug.

" Yes," answered Kreeze, in a curious voice. "One of the company's pilots has just arrived from London, and he brought me a letter in which were some photographs that I found very interesting. As a matter of fact they should have been here a couple of days ago had there not been a hitch." Kreeze paused for a moment and then went on. "You told us, Major Lissie, when you booked your ticket, that you were an officer of the Indian Army."

"Absolutely," agreed Bertie, wondering what was coming.

"Then how do you account for that?" Kreeze selected a photograph from a number that lay on his desk and passed it over. Bertie took it, adjusted his monocle, and looked at the print. And as he looked a broad smile spread over his face. Not that he felt in the least like smiling, for the photograph was of himself, taken at the entrance to Scotland Yard.

" Why were you not honest? " questioned Kreeze, in an injured voice. " Why this deception? You would have been just as welcome here as an officer of the C.I.D., as the Indian Army. Surely you did not expect to find here anything of an improper nature? Or did you? "

"One never knows you know—if you see what I

mean? " answered Bertie lightly. "Police officers are not always welcome. What's all the fuss about. I m not the first man to travel incognito."

"It was not fair on the company," asserted Kreeze. " After all, the management is responsible for your safety and in a place like this an accident can easily happen. Who sent you here—Bigglesworth?"

"Matter of fact, he did suggest that I might care to do a little shooting."

"And have a look round at the same time suppose?"

"We always look round, wherever we are, you know," answered Bertie.

"And have you had a look round?"

"Of course."

"And what did you find?"

"Nothing very exciting—so far."

"And just what did you expect to find ?"

Bertie frowned. "Here I say, aren't you getting a trifle presumptuous? I'm not going to stand here and answer your beastly questions."

"Where's Bigglesworth now?"

"Why not ring up the Yard—they may tell you."

" Where's your friend Hebblethwalte?"

"I don't know the answer to that one, either," replied Berlie truthfully enough. "He twisted an ankle—"

" Yes—we know all about that. Kisumo told us."

Kreeze drummed on the table with his fingers. "Well, that's all I have to say to you for the moment, Mr. Lissie. You had better take Kisumo with you and see if you can find Hebblethwaite."

To say that Bertie was astonished by this suggestion would be to put it mildly. Considering what Kreeze now knew, a threat of instant death would have been more easily understandable. Then he realized that

without transport he was as much a prisoner in Kudinga as he would have been in an internment camp.

"I trust you won't try to leave us without saying good-bye," remarked Kreeze in a silky voice. "You would have a long walk home."

"Wouldn't dream of it," answered Bertie cheerfully, as he left the office.

Actually, he was still feeling slightly dazed by the sudden change in the situation. To start with, Tug's arrival on the scene had shaken him not a little. Yet there was, after all, nothing remarkable about that, he reflected. It was merely that he had been so occupied with his own affairs that he had forgotten all about Tug. There was this to be thankful for. As far as he and Ginger were concerned the game was up. Kreeze knew who they were, and must know why they had come to Kudinga. But he did not know about Tug.

That he himself should be allowed to walk out of the office, apparently free, was still something that he could not understand. More astonishing still was it that he had been allowed to keep his weapons. From the moment he saw the photograph of himself, and realized that the deception was finished, he was prepared to be disarmed and put under lock and key. But nothing of the sort had happened. Still, he did not attempt to deceive himself. Kreeze knew that he had got him where he wanted him. Moreover, it would be the easiest thing in the world for Kreeze to dispose of him, and Ginger, when it suited him to do so. He wondered if Kreeze was the head of the show, but doubted it; there was, he thought, a bigger man than Kreeze behind the organization. Anyway, the first thing to do now was to find Ginger and let him know what had happened; and as this was the very thing

that Kreeze had invited him to do there seemed no cause for immediate apprehension.

Kisumo had followed him out. Together, at Bertie's suggestion, they went to Ginger's room to make sure that he had not come back. Actually, he was hoping to see Tug. And in fact he did see him on the verandah, but he was given no chance to speak to him. Rather than take a risk he decided that it would be better to wait. No doubt there would be a better opportunity later.

Ginger was not in his room, so Kisumo strode on to the main gate. Without speaking they took the track which they had followed earlier in the day. Kisumo, as was customary, carried the rifle. Bertie would have preferred to carry it himself, but he was not in the mood to start an argument with the black, as would have happened had he asked for it.

He was seriously worried about Ginger. He could not imagine what could have detained him for so long. They had little time in which to find him, for the sun was down, and twilight fast closing in.

Striding on, they passed into the now gloomy aisles of the forest. And it was here, somewhere in the middle of the belt, that Kreeze's strange behaviour was explained. Bertie, not expecting any such revelation, was taken unawares.

The thing began when he asked Kisumo for his rifle.

It was, he knew, the hour when the larger carnivorous animals left their daylight retreats for the water-holes; there was a chance that they might encounter one at any moment and he wanted to be ready.

Kisumo, who had been leading, stopped, and turning round in the middle of the track faced Bertie from a distance of a few yards. His whole bearing had altered

page 103

suddenly, and his expression with it. The respectful native had gone. An insolent negro stood in his place. Now, for the first time, when he spoke he used the drawling jargon of the American gangster.

"You won't want this no more, brother," he jeered, referring to the rifle.

"Why not? " asked Bertie, still not fully understanding.

"Cause your shooting days are over, fly-cop," jeered the black. "I'm doing the shooting and you're going to be the target—see?"

"No, not quite," returned Bertie, adjusting his eyeglass. He had a pretty good idea of what was going to happen and wondered why the possibility had not occurred to him.

"The boss has decided to manage without you," went on the negro,



who seemed to be enjoying the situation so much that he was reluctant to end it. " It's sure easy here to deal with cops. By the time the hyenas here have finished with you all that'll be left for identification will be your cigarette case. What the hyenas and jackals leave of a carcass don't amount to much—rags and bones, that's all. There'll be a little bit in the papers about a hunter biting off more'n he could chew and that'll be the end of it. Get the idea?"

Bertie got the idea without difficulty. He was thinking fast. He saw with anger that he had walked into a simple trap from which there appeared to be no way out. Kisumo held the rifle. The muzzle covered him. The first move he made would produce the fatal shot. He decided that he would not at any rate stand still and wait for the bullet. To make a jump for it was his only chance, such as it was. He braced his

page 104

muscles. The black, as if sensing Bertie's decision, stiffened and took aim.

Bertie leapt sideways; or rather he attempted to leap; but he was standing on a patch of mud and his feet skidded from under him. In trying to recover he only made matters worse, and he fell heavily in the middle of the track.

Before he could move again a rifle shot crashed, shattering the silence. With the reverberations of the report came the scream of startled birds, and the snorting and plunging of nocturnal beasts disturbed in the jungle.

As these sounds died away Kisumo lowered his rifle. Bertie lay still.

A solemn hush fell.

## Chapter 9

### Tug Finds A Job

IF Ginger and Bertie had wasted no time in getting themselves inside the Stellar organization neither had Tug been idle. Things had gone well from the start, even if there had been one or two difficult situations.

On arriving in London he had collected some kit from home and then taken a room at the Beverley, one of the numerous small, drab hotels,

that flourish in the region of King's Cross station. His next move was to insert the advertisement, worded on the lines suggested by Biggles, in the leading London newspapers. He was just in time to catch the late editions, and the advertise-page 105

ments appeared the following morning. He did not give his address, nor a box number; he thought it would be better to give his hotel telephone number, as this would enable anyone interested to get in touch with him in the shortest possible time. This meant, of course, that he had to remain near at hand should any calls come through; but as he had nothing else to do this did not matter.

In the course of the morning he received three calls.

The first was from a man who advised him to give up flying and invited him to sell his vacuum cleaners. Tug made some pungent suggestions as to what the man might do with his vacuum cleaners, and hung up. The second call was from a man who was interested in starting an air line of his own. His trouble was he had no money. Tug said he hadn't any money either, and that closed the conversation. The third call, which came just before noon, was more promising.

This time the caller rang up to say that he was interested in the advertisement but was disinclined to discuss his business over the telephone. Would Tug meet him at five o'clock in the palm lounge of the Regency Hotel, in Piccadilly, where they could talk over a cup of tea. The caller said that for recognition purposes he would be wearing a grey suit with a red carnation in his buttonhole.

Tug promised to be there.

In due course he presented himself and without difficulty found his man, who, to Tug's mild surprise, was not alone.

He had brought with him a companion, for a purpose which was disclosed later. He who wore the red carnation, and introduced himself as a Mr. Black, was the typical town business-man type, wellgroomed, keen-faced, with a brisk manner. Tug placed

page 106

him in the early forties. The man made no reference to his companion apart from a casual, "It's all right, this is a friend of mine." The friend gave Tug a long appraising stare, which Tug returned. This man was younger—about thirty. He was tall, well-built, and good-looking in a harsh, angular sort of way. His eyes were pale grey, cold and

unsmiling.

High pronounced cheekbones suggested that he was not British, as was confirmed later.

"Please sit down," invited Black, briskly, but courteously. "By the way, what is the name?" Tug supplied the information.

"Have a cup of tea, Mr. Carrington?" went on Black. "Thanks."

"You're a pilot and you're looking for a job, eh?"

"Correct," answered Tug. He started to give his qualifications, but Black stopped him.

"We'll come back to that presently," he said. "I'd like to ask you one or two personal questions first if you don't mind?"

"Go ahead," requested Tug.

Black went on. "Please don't be offended, but from the way you worded your advertisement I rather gathered that you were short of money?"

Tug admitted that he wasn't exactly flush at the moment.

"Don't think me rude, and don't answer if you don't want to, but—just how short of money are you?" Tug cocked a questioning eye. "Has that got anything to do with how I fly?"

Black offered a cigarette. "Yes, in a way, it has. Too many young fellows nowadays are apt to throw their weight about. That's probably the result of the war. But it doesn't make for amiable business page 107

relationships. The point is this. When a fellow is really tight for money he is far more likely to do what he's told without arguing—and without asking too many questions. In other words, he is concerned with keeping his job. See what I mean?"

"Yes, now you put it like that," answered Tug. "I may as well be frank. I'm as near broke as makes no difference."

When Black spoke again his voice had dropped a tone, and had taken on a peculiar significance which Tug did not miss.

"May I take it that you wouldn't quibble about any work you might be asked to do, even though it was a trifle unusual

—if there was real money hanging to it?"

Tug could see the way the conversation was drifting, and he tried to be helpful. There was no point in wasting time. It was evident that the sooner he let Black see that he wasn't particular how he earned his money, the faster they would get to the point. But he did not want to appear too willing. That might look suspicious.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "I wouldn't be too particular—that is, as long as it was a flying job."

"Quite so. What sort of salary had you in mind?"

"Depends on what I was asked to do," said Tug cautiously. "For a full-time flying job I should reckon on not less than forty pounds a month."

A ghost of a smile crossed Black's face. "What would you say to a hundred a month and all found?"

Tug grinned. "I shouldn't say anything. I should know I was dreaming."

"Well, dreams sometimes come true. Naturally, we should expect something for that."

"I should expect to do something for it," asserted

page 108

Tug. "But don't get the idea that I'm dumb. When people offer more dough than they're asked for they've usually got another card to play. Do I guess right?"

Black nodded. "Dead right. I like the way you keep pace with an argument."

"What's the snag?"

"There's no snag. The extra money would be for doing just what you're told without asking awkward questions; and when you've done it, forgetting about it."

"Sounds easy," murmured Tug, sipping the tea that Black had handed to him. "Mind if I make another guess?"

"Go ahead."

"You've got some private freight you want carrying somewhere?"

"We're getting on fine," declared Black. "In fact, I think we've got far enough to put the rest of the cards on the table.

The sort of freight I'm interested in is sometimes difficult to get through customs. Now how do you feel about it?"

"The load I carry in my machine is no concern of mine—as long as I get paid for carrying it. I did my share of the dirty work in the war, but that cuts no ice now. If the government can't provide me with a pay load then I'll take what I can get."

"That's common sense," approved Black. "In times like these you have to help yourself."

"That's how I figure it," agreed Tug.

Black eyed him through narrow lids. "You're sure about this? I mean, there can't be any changing your mind when once you've started."

"I don't change my mind as easy as all that, and I

page 109

(illustration)

don't quarrel with my bread and butter—not when it's got jam on it, too," declared Tug. "But I must tell you this. I haven't got a civil ticket. You'll have to give me time to get one."

"Don't worry about that," said Black easily. "We'll take care of that angle. When can you start?"

Tug looked up. "You seem to be in a hurry."

"We are. We've lost a couple of pilots lately; we're short-handed and the work's piling up. You may have to put in long hours for a start."

Tug flicked the ash off his cigarette. "What happened to the two pilots? " he asked casually.

"They thought they could do better than work for us," answered Black evenly. "One thought he could sell something to the police, and the other aimed to get rich quick by telling a story to a newspaper. They both met with accidents.

One, who should have known better, walked into an airscrew when it was turning. The other was knocked down and killed by a car in Fleet Street. I hope you've got more sense than to do anything silly like that?"

"I should hope so," replied Tug. "But don't get the idea that you can give me the run around all the time. I'm not selling myself body and soul. I want some private life, once in a while."

"You do your job and you'll get it," promised Black. "When can you start?"

"Soon as you like. What's the job?"

"Simple and straightforward. For the time being we shall want you in North Africa. Ivan here will go out with you.

He's our chief pilot. He'll check up that you can handle the plane."

"What's the freight?"

"There isn't any, this time. There's an urgent

page 110

letter to go out, that's all. Can you start in the morning?"

"Sure."

"Okay then. You'll get your orders when you get to our Cairo office. Meanwhile, Ivan will ask you a few technical questions about your flying experience."

Tug turned to the third man present, who now spoke for the first time. His English was good and, strangely enough, considering that it was spoken with a pronounced accent, embodied a lot of R.A.F. slang. Tug judged him to be a Pole who had served in the R.A.F. during the war. It was soon evident that he knew his job, too, for he put Tug through a short but comprehensive aero-catechism. He began with Tug's practical experience, flying hours, and the like, and went on to aerodynamics, navigation, and air regulations. These questions Tug had no

difficulty in answering, for they had been part of his everyday life for five years. There was only one uneasy moment, and that was when Ivan asked Tug what squadron he served in during the war. It was on the tip of Tug's tongue to say No. 666, which was Biggles' squadron, but he remembered in time and named the units in which he had served before joining Biggles.

When Ivan had finished he turned to Black. "Okay," he said. "I should say he's just the job."\*

Black took a wallet from his pocket and slipped Tug a wad of notes. "There's fifty to go on with," he said. "And there's plenty more where that came from."

This Tug had no difficulty in believing. If these men were the counterfeiters Biggles was looking for, he mused, it didn't matter to them how much they paid him.

\* "Just the job" is R.A.F. slang meaning exactly what is wanted.

page 111

"Where are you going now?" asked Black.

"Back to my hotel—unless you have any suggestion to make?" answered Tug.

"It's a bit out of the way. We like to have our pilots where we can get at them easily."

"And where you can see what they're doing, eh?" suggested Tug softly.

Black frowned. "Now don't get smart," he reproved. "But you can put it that way if you like. To save trouble we run a little place near Croydon where the boys can get together. You'll find it nice and comfortable. We call it the I.P.C.—

that is, the International Pilots' Club. The address is, The Laurels, Upper Purley Walk. Make it your home when you're in this country. You might as well get your stuff together and take it down tonight. You'll be handy for moving off in the morning."

"Suits me," agreed Tug.

The two men got up. "Good—bye for now," said Black. "We'll see you later."

Tug nodded. Out of the corners of his eyes he watched the men thread their way through the tables towards the exit.

Near the swing doors it seemed to him that Black exchanged a meaning look with a heavily—built man, dressed in a navy blue suit, who was doing nothing in particular. Nothing was said, however. In fact, he was not sure that the incident had not been a trick of his imagination. Without a backward glance Black and his tall confederate walked on and were quickly out of sight.

Tug waited for a few minutes, thinking things over.

Not a word had been said about Stellar Skyways, but he felt sure that Biggles' ruse had worked; at any rate, he was in touch with what was obviously a crooked

page 112

organization, so he had not wasted his time. Whether Black was connected with Stellar or not he would be worth following up, decided Tug. His first inclination was to call Biggles on the telephone right away and tell him of what had happened; but on second thoughts he concluded that a public call box was not the place. It would be better to go back to the hotel and put the call through from there.

A taxi took him home. Evening was closing in by the time he arrived, bringing with it one of those dismal semi-opaque fogs, that are the bane of London. He went up to his room, had a quick wash, and then came down to the large, gloomy Victorian hall, where the telephone was installed.

He had picked up the receiver and was waiting for the operator to answer when a slight movement at the far side of the hall caught his eye. He noticed this without any real interest because he was entirely taken up with what he was doing; but in an abstract sort of way he was puzzled; he was puzzled because the corner where the movement had occurred was occupied by one of those large, circular hallstands, common in hotels, with numerous projections for the accommodation of hats and overcoats. There were plenty of coats and mackintoshes on the stand, and he thought it was one of them that had moved. But garments do not move of their own accord, and allowing his eyes to follow the coat downward he was not very surprised to see two legs. He observed that someone was standing behind the piece of furniture.

At this moment the operator asked for the number required, and Tug



had to do some quick thinking. He did not of course know who was behind the hallstand but he had a shrewd idea. To hang up now would look page 113

suspicious. Yet, obviously, he could not ask for a trunk line, to call Delmar, as he had intended. On the spur of the moment he asked for the number of the garage where he kept his taxi, explaining that he had not dialled the number because the automatic system at the other end was out of order.

A garage hand answered. Tug told him that he had merely rung up to say that he was going away on a job and might not be back for a few days. He would look in and settle his account at the first opportunity. This done he hung up and went back up the stairs. No one had yet switched on the light, so on the first landing he stopped, and creeping back peeped down into the hall. A man was just stepping from behind the coatstand. It was the man in the blue suit whom he had seen at the Regency, the man with whom he had thought Black had exchanged glances. So he had not been mistaken after all, he pondered. He was not altogether surprised. Obviously Black would not accept him on his own word straight away. He might have known that he would be watched, for a little while, anyway. He perceived for the first time that it might not be so easy for him to get in touch with Biggles as he had casually supposed. The man put on to watch him had only to hear him speaking to the Air Ministry, or Scotland Yard, and the game would be up. Not only that, he would be what is known in the American underworld as on the spot, for on Black's own statement the people for whom he worked made no bones about an occasional murder.



With these thoughts in his mind Tug went along to his room, which was on the first floor, and locked the door behind him. He decided that it would be dangerous to use the telephone. The alternative was to write a letter. That should be easy, although it

page 114

would take a little longer to get word through to Biggles. He would drop the letter in a posting box on the way to Croydon. He had no notepaper, envelopes or stamps, not expecting that he would need them, but he found an old bill in his pocket, the envelope of which, bearing a penny stamp, had not been stuck up. That would do. The stamp didn't matter. Biggles could pay the surcharge.

He scribbled a note on the back of the bill telling Biggles what had happened. He said he was taking his lot to Croydon that night, but in all probability would be going straight on to Egypt. Of his movements after that he knew nothing.

He had slipped the note into the envelope, which he had already addressed, and was licking the flap when he heard the handle of the door move. For a second he waited, uncertain how to act. It was evident that someone had just tried the door, and he thought he could guess who it was. His main concern now was to get rid of the note

which, should it be found on him would certainly cost him his life; if he was being followed as closely as this, he reasoned, he might not find it easy to dispose of once he left the room. Very quietly he opened the window, which he knew overlooked the back yard—a concreted area occupied chiefly by rubbish bins. The house boy was there, sitting on a box cleaning boots. Tug had seen him once before, and that was when the lad had carried his bag up to his room; and on that occasion he had been struck by his smart and obliging manner. The fact that he wore an old Air Training Corps uniform with corporal's chevrons on the sleeves, may have had something to do with this; in any case, it caused Tug to look upon him with favour. He decided that the lad was

page 115

to be trusted, so, cupping his hands round his mouth he called in a loud whisper, "Hi! Corporal!"

The boy's brush stopped in mid-air. He looked up. Tug held out the envelope and let it fall. "Post it," he said tersely.

"I'm in a jam."

The boy caught the envelope. "Okay," he called cheerfully. He glanced at the address and waved a hand. "It's as good as in the bag," he promised.

"Thanks," said Tug, and closed the window softly. As he did this there came a knock on the door. He went over and opened it. As he expected, it was the man in the blue suit.

As the man made a move to advance into the room Tug put a hand against his chest. "Not so fast, stranger," he said curtly. "You've come to the wrong room. I live here."

"It's all right. Mr. Black sent me along to see if I could give you a hand," announced the visitor casually.

"Then you can go back and tell Mr. Black that I don't need any help," returned Tug crisply. "I've packed a bag before and I know my way around."

"Okay—okay—nothing to get excited about," chided the visitor gently. "We're all in the same business, ain't we?"

"That depends on what business you're in," growled Tug, not a little

relieved to know that his letter was on its way to the posting box.  
"Who are you, anyway? " he demanded.

"The boys call me Joe."

"And what do you do for a living?"

"Among other things I drive a car. I've got one outside. Black thought you might like to use it to run down to Croydon

—save a taxi."

page 116

Tug was now more than ever glad that he had got rid of the letter. It was clear that he had taken what might turn out to be his only chance, for he had an increasing suspicion that Joe's real job was not to let him out of his sight. This proved correct, for as soon as Tug's bag was packed Joe remarked: "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go."

"No hurry, is there?" inquired Tug. "I've got to pay my bill yet."

"Okay, then let's pay it," was the cheerful reply.

"How long is this going on?" asked Tug in a brittle voice, as they went down the stairs.

"Just until the boss is satisfied that you ain't likely to lose yerself in this big town," answered Joe frankly. "What's the matter with me—don't you like my company? "

"I've had better," returned Tug. "You know, I seem to have seen your face before."

"Shouldn't wonder at that," answered Joe. "My mug was in all the papers not so long ago, when I was in the army."

"I'll bet it wasn't in for winning the V.C.," sneered Tug.

"Nothing so difficult," declared Joe, grinning. "They caught me bringing in a few odds and ends of jewellery from Germany, when I was coming home on leave."

"What did they give you for that?"

"Six months—but I'm getting my own back—see?"

"Ah—huh. Sure I see," murmured Tug.

"You wouldn't blame me for that?"

"Not likely. After all, I'm in the same boat."

"Good for you—the more the merrier."

Tug paid his bill, after which they went out into the

page 117

street where, as Joe had said, he had a car waiting. In half an hour they were in Croydon.

## Chapter 10

### Melancholy News

THE International Pilots' Club turned out to be a private house standing behind tall hedges of the depressing evergreens that gave the place its name. But inside it was a different story. It was clear that every effort had been made to make the place a bright and cheerful home. It so happened that at the time of Tug's visit there was only one other pilot in residence, an uncommunicative Frenchman who, so Tug was told, generally flew between London and Paris.

There was still no sign or mention of Stellar Skyways.

During the evening Black came in. Ivan was with him. They sat talking to Tug for a while. Apart from that the evening passed without incident. Ivan said that as they would be moving off at dawn he was going to bed early, and advised Tug to do the same—advice which was accepted.

The break of dawn found them on the tarmac at Croydon Airport, and there at a glance, outside one of the private hangars, Tug found the answer to the big problem that had exercised his mind. It was a Pacemaker aircraft, bearing the flying dragon insignia of Stellar Skyways: The registration letters were not those of the machine of which he had seen a photograph. Ivan said it was the aircraft they were to take

page 118

to Cairo. There were no passengers, no freight. He had only a letter to

deliver. With a sly smile he handed Tug the licence and documents he would have to carry as a civil air line pilot. How they had been obtained in the time was a mystery Tug did not try to solve.

"Expensive business, isn't it, taking a machine all that way just to deliver a letter?" he suggested.

"It depends on how important the letter happens to be," answered Ivan curtly. "In this case it is very important."

Tug said no more about it, and in a few minutes they were in the air, heading south. Tug took over control. Ivan sat beside him, watching, until it became evident that Tug needed no instruction. What little conversation passed between them was confined to technicalities. Tug had to be on his guard only once, and that was when they were flying across Italy. Ivan asked him, casually, if he had ever run into a fellow named Bigglesworth.

Tug said he thought he had heard the name.

"He's running an air cop service for Scotland Yard," Ivan told him.

"Is that so?" returned Tug, as if the matter did not interest him.

"It is because of him we are flying to Africa today," said Ivan in his stiff English. "Bigglesworth and his friends have some shocks coming to them," he added.

"I couldn't care less," murmured Tug, using the popular R.A.F. expression. Nevertheless he wondered with no small anxiety what these shocks were. "What about these shocks—are they anything to do with us?" he inquired carelessly.

"They might have been," answered Ivan vaguely. Tug dare not pursue the subject.

page 119

Cairo was reached without mishap, and after a night spent at the airport hotel, a night during which Ivan never left him

—even going to the length of sharing a room with him—they returned to the tarmac, and the Stellar company's office.

Here there was a whispered conversation between Ivan and the booking clerk. At the conclusion of this Ivan came back to Tug and

informed him that certain events had necessitated a change of plan. There had been some trouble in Rome, and he, Ivan, would have to go there. This meant that Tug would have to carry on single-handed. The letter which Ivan had carried was to be delivered to Mr. Kreeze, manager of the company's hunting lodge at Kudinga. Tug was shown the place on the map. Ivan asked him if he was sure that he could manage the trip. Tug, who felt that things were going well, told him that he needn't worry about that. As they checked the compass course Tug was, in fact, elated. Nothing could be better, for happening to glance at the passenger list, which lay on the table in the office, he saw that the last two names registered were Major Lissie and Captain Hebblethwaite.

When, a few minutes later, he was told that he was to get off, Ivan handed him the important letter. There was nothing else to go. Tug put the letter in his pocket and was soon in the air, heading south down the Nile Valley.

The trip was made without incident, for the weather was fine and the machine gave no trouble. He passed another Stellar aircraft heading north; that was all, and at noon precisely he touched down on the sun-scorched landing-ground at Kudinga. A steward came out to meet him to tell him that he was to report to the manager's office instantly. Tug taxied the aircraft into

page 120

the shade of the temporary hangar and then, climbing down, followed the steward to the lodge.

The manager greeted him brusquely. "I'm Kreeze. I'm in charge here," he announced. "You're a new man? "

Tug introduced himself.

"You managed to get here all right?"

"No trouble at all."

"Good. Make yourself at home. You'll find anything you want at the lodge. Have a rest. I may have to ask you to go back to Cairo tonight. It depends on the contents of the letter which you have brought. I was advised of it by radio."

Tug handed over the letter.

Kreeze ripped it open and withdrew the rather bulky contents. Tug, watching, saw with mild surprise, but without particular interest, that these included a packet of photographs. Kreeze drew a deep breath, uttered a curious exclamation that might have been satisfaction, and arranged the photographs face upwards on his desk.

As Tug's eyes settled on them he ceased to breathe.

He stared, and stared again, as if the pictures mesmerized him. The background in each case was the same. It was the entrance to Scotland Yard. Four people were represented. They were Biggles, Algy, Ginger and Bertie.

"Just what I wanted," purred Kreeze, rubbing his hands together.

"Who are they, anyway?" asked Tug, trying to keep his voice steady. It made him sick to think that he, of all people, had been the means of betraying Bertie and Ginger, whom he knew must be somewhere about.

"They're the smart boys of the Special Air Police," answered Kreeze. "Only they're not so smart as they page 121

think they are. A couple of them are going to discover that very soon. They happen to be here now. They have, as the saying is, stepped into the soup with both feet."

Now that he was able to think more clearly, what puzzled Tug was, where the photographs had come from. If Stellar already possessed photos why had they bothered to try to take fresh ones in Mount Street? He risked a question.

Picking up a print of Biggles he looked at it closely and inquired: "Neat work, getting hold of these. How did you manage it?"

"Two or three brainy fellows have got together and are running a little photographic library," answered Kreeze. "In the same way that the police have a library of people they don't like, so the people they don't like will now be able to get photographs of them, and their narks, snoopers, stool-pigeons, and so on. These lads are doing well, too, I believe—as they should, charging five guineas a time for prints."

So here, thought Tug, was yet another racket to outwit the forces of law and order. He would attend to it when he got back.

"You say two of these fellows are here?" he prompted. The thought



had struck him that, if Kreeze were to send him straight back to Egypt, he might have to leave without seeing them; and his obvious duty now was to warn them of what had happened, even if it involved risks.

"They're out shooting," Kreeze told him.

"You'll be able to fix them all right, I suppose?" Kreeze gave a short unpleasant laugh. "They've no more hope of getting out of here than a rabbit has of getting out of a wolf pen. You'd better go and get some rest. You'll be going back to Cairo this evening with

page 122

another letter. There are some trophies to go up—you can take them at the same time. You'd better leave about six.

They tell me it's easier to fly in this country, not so bumpy, after the sun goes down."

"That's right," agreed Tug.

He made his way slowly to the lounge. If Bertie and Ginger were out hunting there seemed to be nothing that he could do, except wait for them to come back. That, he reflected miserably, might be any time up to darkness. If they left it too late he would be gone. Even if they returned it might be a difficult matter to get in touch with them in the short time at his disposal.

He had lunch in the dining-room, and hung about all the afternoon, waiting and hoping, but in vain. There was no sign of the hunters. As the sun began to sink he found a seat on the verandah and from there kept watch. Presently, much to his annoyance, Kreeze joined him, and stayed chatting about nothing in particular.

After a little while a man, whom Tug did not know came up and spoke to Kreeze. "Kisumo and Lissie are back," he announced. "The other one's on the loose somewhere."

Kreeze spat a curse. "What's Kisumo playing at, the fool? He had his orders. How did it happen?"

"He says the young 'un sprained an ankle just after they left the wood. He couldn't walk, so he had to be left there.

When he and Lissie got back he wasn't there. They couldn't find him

so they came on home."

Kreeze thought for a moment. "All right," he said slowly. "We'll clear this business up. The photos are just in. As I thought, Lissie and Hebblethwaite are police spies. Where are Kisumo and Lissie now? "

page 123

"They're about. I think Lissie has gone to his room."

"Send them both to my office right away," ordered Kreeze, and walked out.

Tug, taking a chance, for he was desperately anxious to see what happened, followed him. He fully expected to be told to stay where he was, but Kreeze, who seemed preoccupied, said nothing.

There was nobody in the office when they got there, but a minute later Bertie, accompanied by a stalwart black, came in. He saw the muscles of Bertie's face stiffen as his eyes fell on him. Then Kreeze turned, and apparently noticed him for the first time.

"What are you doing here? " said Kreeze sharply. " I told you to get some rest."

Tug had no choice but to withdraw. Deep in thought he made his way to the verandah, and there he waited for some time, hoping for a chance to get even two or three words with Bertie. A little while later he saw him with the black.

They disappeared into the sleeping quarters. When next he saw them they were walking along a track some distance away as if bound on an errand. He dare not risk following them. Like Bertie, he could only hope that they would get an opportunity to compare notes later.

Not long afterwards he was startled to hear a rifle-shot. It was followed closely by two more. He stood up, staring, for the reports came from the direction taken by Bertie and the black.

Kreeze joined him. "Where were those shots?" he asked tersely.

Tug pointed. "Over there."

"How many shots did you hear?"

"Three."

"Hm." Kreeze seemed puzzled. "One should have been enough," he muttered.

Some other men came to the verandah. Tug did not know who they were. One, smoking a big meerschaum pipe, Kreeze addressed as Doctor.

Tug was wondering what Kreeze could have meant by his remark, 'One should have been enough.' It sounded as if something had been arranged. Then, suddenly, the matter was explained when Kreeze, speaking to the man he had called Doctor, continued the conversation. "Lissie's a police spy. So's the fellow who came with him. They've been here long enough and they may have seen too much, so I told Kisumo to start liquidating. He knows what to do. As he should be carrying Lissie's rifle there ought to be no difficulty about it."

The Doctor nodded. "Another accident, eh?"

"It's the best way."

By this time the ghastly truth had struck Tug like a douche of icy cold water. Bertie had been sent out with the black to be murdered. The conversation he had just overheard could mean nothing else. The black would return alone to report that the rifle had gone off by accident and Bertie had been shot. This, then, was one way unwanted visitors were disposed of.

Tug lit a cigarette with hands that were not quite steady. It gave him an empty feeling in the pit of the stomach to think that he had actually stood there and watched Bertie walking away to his death.

"I'm puzzled about the three shots," said Kreeze. "One should have been enough. It's time Kisumo was back. I hope nothing went wrong. We'd better wait for a bit."

They waited for what Tug in his state of mind judged to be an hour, although in reality it was probably not page 125

more than a quarter of that time. The black did not come. Then, suddenly, Kreeze seemed to reach a decision.

"Something must have gone wrong," he asserted. "We'd better go and find out what's happened. Doctor, get some of the boys together."

The search party when it set off numbered a dozen men, more than half of whom were blacks. The white men carried rifles. Nearly all carried an electric torch.

"Can I come along?" Tug asked Kreeze, in an offhand way.

"Please yourself," was the curt reply. "But for this I should have finished the letter I want you to take to Cairo. You may have to start a bit later—not that it matters."

The party reached the edge of the forest without seeing any sign of Bertie or Kisumo, so torches were switched on and the march continued along the path that ran through the timber. A minute or two later there was an outcry from some of the blacks who were marching ahead. The rest, including Tug, increased their pace, but were soon brought to a halt by a bunch of natives who stood muttering among themselves. Torches cut a broad beam of light along the path, making the scene as light as day. Together they formed a spotlight on such a picture of carnage as Tug had not seen since the war. The place looked like a shambles.

The first object on which his horror—filled eyes alighted was the mutilated corpse of a black. It had been nearly tom in halves. Just beyond lay the body of the creature which had obviously been responsible. It was a buffalo. In the artificial light, backed by the inky shadows of the forest, it looked like some monster from another world. Gore was still dripping from its gaping mouth. There was blood on its horns. Tug moved his position and page 126

saw, just beyond the animal, another figure, and once having seen it he lost interest in the others. It was Bertie. He lay flat on his back in a welter of blood, one leg doubled under him, one arm outflung towards a rifle that lay half-trampled in the mud. Congealing blood formed a hideous gash from his forehead to his chin.

Kreeze, after a passing glance at the mangled black, went on to Bertie. He stooped over the body for a moment and then came back. "What a mess," he muttered. "My God! What a mess." He picked up the rifle and jerked an empty cartridge from the breech. He shrugged his shoulders and threw the weapon down again.

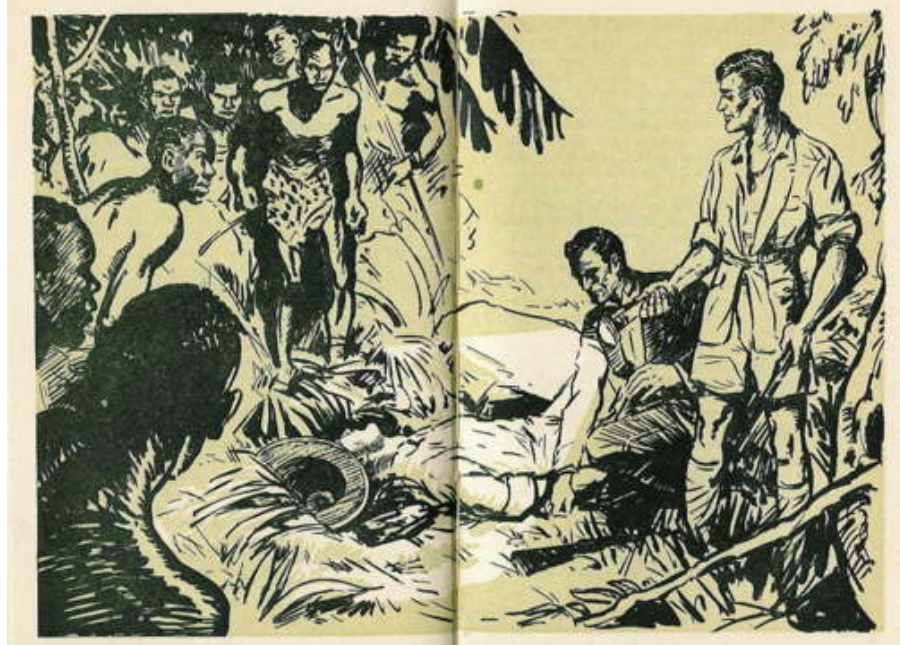
"It's plain enough to see what happened," he declared. "It's the old story. Lissie and Kisumo must have been walking along the path when the beast charged from cover at close range. They got the buffalo, but it finished them first. It would—the devils are like that. Well, there's nothing we can do about it now. We'll set a guard to keep the hyenas off till morning, then bring them in."

Tug, fearing that his emotion would give him away, walked back a short distance down the path, so he did not hear the rest of the conversation. Presently he was overtaken by the party returning to the lodge. He followed blindly, feeling that he was in the throes of a ghastly nightmare. He had his own idea of what had happened. He recalled that there had been a short delay between the first shot and the final two. Kisumo, he felt certain, had fired the first shot, probably shooting Bertie through the back of the head. The report had disturbed the buffalo, which had attacked on sight.

Kisumo had fired two shots into it and then gone down

126

before its charge. The buffalo, mortally wounded, had then died. One thing was certain, thought Tug, in the depths of



his misery; Bertie was dead, and nothing could alter that. He wondered where Ginger was, and what he was doing.

Had he, too, met with a fatal accident? It seemed not unlikely. Nothing could be done about it, anyway. Not that he, Tug, would be allowed to remain at Kudinga, even if he so wished. It would be better, he decided, to get back to Cairo as quickly as possible and by some means let Biggles know what had happened.

When they reached the lodge Kreeze informed him that he might get his machine ready, because he would now finish the letter, which would take only a few minutes.

Actually, it was nearly half an hour before he could get off, because, although he did not know the cause, there was another delay. He got the Pacemaker out, and looking over it saw that some trophies had been put in the luggage compartment. He paid little attention. The truth was, he was too sick to bother about anything.

At length Kreeze bustled up. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "I never knew such a night."

"Why, what's happened now?" asked Tug, consumed by curiosity.

"Those infernal niggers that I left to guard the bodies, bolted. A few

minutes ago they came tearing back shouting that they had been attacked by a lion. If there are lions in the forest hyenas won't be far away. It looks as if all we shall find in the morning will be bones—if we're lucky."

"What does it matter?" muttered Tug callously.

"Here's the letter," said Kreeze, handing him a

page 128

heavily-sealed envelope. "I want you to give it to the booking clerk at Cairo. I've warned him by radio to wait, so you'll find him at the office. You'll get your next orders from him."

Tug put the letter in his pocket. "Okay," he said, and climbed into the cockpit.

For nearly six hours he roared through the luminous African night, and arrived in Cairo to find the booking clerk waiting for him. He handed over the letter.

"I'm going to find a bed," he announced. "I've had all the flying I want for one day."

The clerk nodded. "Please be here in good time in the morning," he requested. "There may be something urgent."

"Good enough," agreed Tug, and departed. Actually, tired though he was, what he really wanted to do was get a cable or radiogram through to Biggles, although he was by no means sure of his whereabouts. Still, a message addressed to Delmar would find him, he reasoned. Biggles would make provision for that.

As he turned the corner of the airport building a figure wearing a long arab burnous sidled towards him, crying for alms.

Tug's answer was short and not very sweet. His mood was far from charitable.

"All right, take it easy," said a voice quietly in English. "Slip in the first alley on the left."

Tug started violently, for the voice was Biggles'. He kept on walking. "Okay," he said softly.

He turned into the alley, and there, a minute later, Biggles joined him.

"Sorry about this pantomime disguise business," said Biggles as he came up. "I hate it, but I've been watching the Stellar office all day hoping to see you,

page 129

and I daren't risk being seen myself. I got your note and followed you out. Algy is with me. What's the news? "

"The news is, Bertie's dead," said Tug grimly.

Biggles took a pace backward. "What? Say that again."

"Bertie's dead," repeated Tug.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I'm standing here," returned Tug wearily.

"I saw his body with my own eyes. He and Ginger were spotted."

"Where's Ginger?"

"God knows. He's disappeared."

"I see," said Biggles quietly. "Algy and I have taken a room at Constantino's Restaurant, just up the road on the left.

Slip along. I'll follow you in."

"Good enough," answered Tug.

## Chapter 11

### Ginger Climbs Down

WHEN Bertie fell in his desperate attempt to escape the bullet about to be fired by the treacherous Kisumo he thought that his last moment had come. Indeed, so sure was he of it that his sinews went taut in expectation of the missile which at any instant must rip through him. At such moments the human brain reaches its maximum efficiency, and one thinks at the speed of light. The shot came, yet, miraculously Bertie felt nothing. The thought flashed through his brain that

page 130



Kisumo had missed him, but even so, he could not understand why he had not heard the swish of the bullet.

He assumed, naturally, that Kisumo had fired the shot. Not for an instant did any other thought occur to him. Twisting towards a bush he snatched a glance at the black to see what he was doing. Then, for the first time, the truth struck him. Kisumo was not even looking in his direction. He had lowered the rifle although he still held it at the ready. He was looking the other way, staring into the forest. The only possible explanation of this strange behaviour was, he had not fired. But a shot had been fired. Who had fired it? At what? There was no indication of the direction from which the sound had come. The only certain thing was, it had been close.

Bertie lay still, crouching low, hoping that he would not be seen. He dare not shift his position for fear of being heard.

Slowly, his hand moved towards his hip pocket for the revolver he carried in it.

At this juncture the picture, which had been as static as a photographic print, sprang to life. There was a tremendous crashing in the undergrowth and into the open burst a buffalo, coughing blood. It appeared to be mad with pain and fury. It saw Kisumo standing in the path and hated him on sight. With a choking bellow of rage the beast charged.

As the mountain of bovine fury thundered towards him Kisumo fired two shots in quick succession. Then the instinct of self-preservation swamped all others and he turned to run. Although at such short range it was almost impossible to miss, the bullets had no effect, much less did they check the charge. The wretched black might as well have fired at a runaway tank.

From the bush in which he was crouching Bertie saw

page 131

the whole thing. Overtaking the man the buffalo tossed him high into the air. Spinning, he fell on the path. The buffalo rushed at him again, and kneeling on him gored him with its horns. Then, with a shuddering sigh, it rolled over on its side. A few spasmodic jerks of its legs and it lay still. Kisumo did not move.

For a minute Bertie did not move either. He was shocked by the dreadful thing he had just seen. Then he crept out, and treading softly

picked up the rifle. Again he stood still, watching the beast until he was satisfied that it was dead.

Then a rustle in the bushes brought him around, and he came within an ace of shooting Ginger, who now appeared on the track.

"Here, I say," said Bertie, in a curiously high-pitched voice, "what are you playing at?"

"Playing!" exclaimed Ginger incredulously. "Did you say playing?"

Bertie pointed. "Did you start this bally bull on the rampage?"

"I shot it, if that's what you mean," answered Ginger grimly. "The brute had me treed the whole afternoon. About half an hour ago it moved off and I decided to try to get out. But he was waiting, the cunning old devil. I saw him watching me from behind a bush so I let him have it. He came on, but I dodged behind a tree and he roared past. That was the last I saw of him. I didn't know anything about you being here. Thank God he didn't get you."

"He's made a beastly mess of Kisumo," said Bertie. "Not that I'm going to shed any tears at that. No bally fear. The rascal was just going to shoot me when you fired."

"He was going to do what?"

"Bump me off, as they say in the classics. But of

page 132

course you don't know. I've been back to camp. Tug's there."

"Tug!"

"Yes. And do you know what he brought?"

"You tell me."

"Photographs. Photographs of us, standing outside the Yard. Kreeze knows we're cops."

"Tug couldn't have known about the photos," declared Ginger.

"Of course not. They were in a letter. But the upshot of it was, Kreeze sent me out ostensibly to look for you, but in reality to be liquidated by Kisumo. As it happened, Kisumo got all the bumping that was

going. He won't do any more—no, by Jove! It'll take some time to pick up the pieces."

Standing there on the bank Bertie told Ginger all that had happened. When he had finished Ginger told him the result of his own reconnaissance, and explained why he had been unable to return to the meeting place.

"We seem to be getting things in a deuce of a mess," said Bertie when he had finished "What do we do next?"

"That's something that will need a bit of thinking about," asserted Ginger. "Obviously we can't go back to the lodge.

Kreeze would make a better job of this murder business if we did."

"We ought to try to get in touch with Tug, somehow," suggested Bertie, cleaning his eyeglass with his handkerchief.

Ginger agreed. "That would be fine. But Kreeze may be watching him, and if we were seen talking to him, apart from anything that might happen to us we should give Tug away. It's no use doing anything in a hurry. Let's think it over."

page 133

Ginger found a not very comfortable seat on the stump of a fallen tree. Bertie, incongruously, used the buffalo's head for the same purpose.

"It's time Biggles was here," resumed Ginger. "I'm dashed if I can see how we're going to get out of this jam. We can't go back to the lodge without the risk of being bumped off and we can't stay here without the risk of being chewed up by wild animals. We should soon starve to death, anyway. The question is, have we got enough evidence to round up this outfit—but that's something Biggles would have to decide. What's he up to, I wonder? Our only chance of getting in touch with him now is through Tug. It would be worth taking a chance to do that. No doubt he'll be going back to Cairo tomorrow—or pretty soon."

"I don't think this blighter Kreeze is likely to leave us floating about loose, if we don't go back to camp," said Bertie.

"I think you're right," answered Ginger thoughtfully. "He's bound to try to find out what's happened to us and Kisumo

—when he doesn't turn up. Let's apply Biggles' method and say, what is Kreeze most likely to do when Kisumo doesn't return? Those three shots that were fired must have been heard at the lodge. As far as Kreeze was concerned, one ought to have been enough. When Kisumo fails to put in an appearance he'll know that something has come unstuck.

The chances are he'll come out to see what's happened. I wonder could we pull a fast one on him ? "

"Have you had a brainwave?" inquired Bertie.

"I wouldn't call it that," answered Ginger. "But let us assume that a search party will come out to see what the shots were about. When Kreeze observes this mess the balloon will go up to a considerable altitude. He'll know you've escaped, in which case he'll turn out every black he's got to look for you. To save all that, I was wondering if it wouldn't be better to lead him to think that you did get bumped off by Kisumo before the buffalo took a hand. Three shots were fired. He'll work it out that the first shot was Kisumo shooting you. The next two shots were fired by Kisumo at the buffalo. Actually, that's pretty well what did happen, and all the evidence here will point that way—the dead buffalo, your rifle lying there, and so on."

"To fit in with that my body should also be wallowing in the gore," Bertie pointed out.

"Is there any reason why it shouldn't be?" inquired Ginger.

Bertie started. "Here, I say, go easy," he protested. "I wouldn't joke about things like that, you know."

"I'm not joking," Ginger told him seriously. "It wouldn't call for much effort for you to dab a spot of blood on your forehead as if a bullet had gone through it, and then arrange yourself like a corpse on the path. I'd take up a position in the bushes and watch what happens."

"I don't like this corpse idea," stated Bertie coldly. "If we stay here I'm likely to be one soon enough."

"But if it came off it would be a winner," argued Ginger.

"Suppose they decided to carry my poor old body back to the lodge? How could I come back to life, if you see what I mean?"

"The chances are they'll wait till morning," declared Ginger. "They won't feel like cleaning up this butcher's shop in the dark."

"And what's going to happen in the morning?"

page 135

"You won't be here."

"I should jolly well think not," asserted Bertie with some warmth. "But isn't that going to look a bit odd? I mean, won't Kreeze and his merry men wonder how I came to life—if you get my meaning?"

"They'll think your body was carried off by a lion, or a hyena. We could arrange things to look like that."

"How? "

"By dragging you through the bushes and splashing blood about."

"Dash that for a tale," protested Bertie. "I don't like all this talk about blood and death. Can't you think of some other way?"

"There's no other way, if we want to lead Kreeze to believe that you've gone for a Burton\*. If we work it this way he won't even bother to look for your body."

"All right. I'll try it, if you're sure there's no other way," agreed Bertie without enthusiasm. "But it all sounds a mucky business to me. Incidentally, what will they think has happened to you? "

"They can think what they like. It might be a good thing to get them guessing."

"And what do we do after Kreeze has been here to inspect the jolly old shambles? "

"We'll creep up to the lodge and try to get in touch with Tug, so that when he gets back to Cairo he can pass our information on to Biggles. But if we're going through with this thing we'd better get cracking. Kreeze or his toughs might arrive here at any time now."

Bertie regarded the gruesome spectacle on the path with disgust. "Just where do you think I'd better arrange myself in this cat's breakfast?" he inquired, rising. And then, before Ginger could answer, he

\* "Gone for a Burton." R.A.F. slang meaning killed

page 136

slipped in a pool of buffalo blood and sat down with a squelch. Gore splashed in all directions and he collected a fair amount of it.

In spite of their serious predicament Ginger buried his face in his hands and sobbed with laughter at the expression on Bertie's face as he picked himself up.

"That," said Bertie with icy calm, "is the finish. I'm going home. I've had enough—absolutely enough. Kreeze or no Kreeze I am going to the lodge for a bath. If you think I'm going to walk about Africa in a pair of bloodstained breeches—"

"Don't be a fool," said Ginger, struggling to stifle his mirth. "You'll make an absolutely perfect corpse as you are now.

Moreover, you needn't be afraid of getting in a mess when you lie down. Just a minute—what's this coming?" He stared down the path. Through the trees he could see a cluster of lights advancing. "Here they come," he said tersely.

"Get weaving. Lie down—anywhere."

Bertie sat down beside the dead buffalo. "Don't you go too far away in case a hyena takes a fancy to my pants," he requested curtly.

"I shall be handy," promised Ginger.

"What about my rifle?"

"Leave it where it is. That's all part of the arrangement. You'll have to lie flat. Corpses don't sit up."

"Face up or down? "

"Please yourself."

Bertie lay back, face upwards, arm out flung, one leg doubled under him.

"That's perfect," Ginger told him. "All you have to do now is lie still. I'm moving off." He crept away into the bushes, found a comfortable position about a dozen yards from the track, and settled down to

watch.

page 137

In two or three minutes a group of figures could be seen advancing towards the spot. Ginger made out Kreeze, Robinson, the Doctor, and two other white men whom he did not know, and several blacks. Nearly all carried torches, and it was perhaps due to the glare of these that he did not at first see another man, a white man, who tailed along in the rear of the party. When he did see him, and recognized him, he held his breath with shock, and not a little shame.

It was Tug. That Tug might be in the search party was a possibility that had not occurred to him. He realized instantly what it meant. Tug would be taken in with the rest of them. What his feelings would be when he saw Bertie's bloodstained body was something Ginger preferred not to think about. He was intensely sorry for him but there was nothing he could do about it now. The grim game would have to be played out.

The search party hurried forward when it saw the horrid spectacle, and then halted. Their combined torches made a spotlight on a scene that horrified even Ginger, although he knew that it was not so bad as it appeared to be. The natives drew in breath with a sharp hissing sound.

Kreeze, who now advanced alone, was the first to speak. "What a mess," he muttered in a shocked voice, as he surveyed the scene.

The blacks seemed inclined to back away.

Kreeze walked up and down, looking at everything.

He picked up Bertie's rifle, jerked the empty cartridge out of the breech, and threw the weapon down again. Then he said, almost to a word, what Ginger had predicted.

"It's plain enough to see what happened here," he told Robinson and the Doctor in a voice that was low, page 138

but loud enough for Ginger to hear. "Kisumo did his job; the buffalo must have been in the timber, and charged; he fired two shots at it. And he hit it, too, but it must have been too close for him to stop it. The brute got him. We'd better leave things as they are until everyone that matters has seen this. We shall need witnesses. Dupray will make a good one. No one will doubt his word. We'll get some photographs

in the morning to show to the authorities if they start asking questions. We'll bring stretchers along at the same time and take the bodies back to the lodge for burial.

We'll put Lissie beside Carding. A few graves will do no harm—teach people to do as they're told."

"What's happened to the other one—Hebblethwaite—do you suppose?" asked Robinson.

"He can't be far away. He may have had an accident, too. He wouldn't be such a fool as to stay out all night in this sort of country if he was able to get in. We'll attend to him in the morning. Well, there's no point in hanging about here; we may as well get back."

"You'll have to leave someone on guard or the hyenas will mess things up before you can get the photos," observed Robinson.

"Yes, that's right." Kreeze beckoned to a tall native. "Kolo, you stay here and keep the hyenas off. "

From the way Kolo started to protest it was evident that he did not relish the job.

"Two of the others can stay with you," Kreeze told him. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing will come near while you're here."

Kolo said no more, but if his expression was anything to go by he was far from happy. There was some page 139

argument as to who should stay with him, but at length it was decided and the rest of the party set off back down the track.

From first to last, Ginger noticed, Tug had said nothing. Not that there was much that he could say. Up to a point, Ginger mused, everything had gone well; but apart from Tug's arrival on the spot there was one development which he had not foreseen. This was the guard that had been left over the bodies. Well, there was only one answer to that. They would have to be got rid of in order that Bertie might remove himself from a position which, to put it mildly, was not very nice. How this was to be done was not immediately apparent, but thinking the problem over he soon worked out a plan, a plan which was based on the nervous attitude of the guards. When he put it into action it succeeded so well that it nearly had fatal consequences.

First, he attempted to get into a better position.



This, as he realized an instant too late, was a mistake, for his hand fell on a piece of dead wood and it snapped under the pressure. In a flash the three blacks had spun round to stare in the direction of the sound.

Ginger saw that his only hope was to proceed with the plan. This he did. Cupping his hands round his mouth he gave his best imitation of a lion's growl. It may have been a good imitation or it may have been a bad one. It may have been that the natives were not in the mood to be critical. Anyway, it worked. Kolo and his companions, according to Ginger's plan, should have bolted for their lives; and this in fact they did; but before leaving the spot Kolo hurled the spear that he carried into the bushes. Fortunately for Ginger that was the limit of his courage, for the spear zipped through his bush, passing so close to him that in his

page 140

fright he fell back, making a good deal of noise. Aware of what he had done he dropped flat, expecting another spear; but Kolo had had enough. With a yell of terror he fled down the track along which his comrades were already pelting.

Nor did they look back, which was a fortunate thing, or they would have seen the supposed corpse of Bertie getting up with alacrity. As he told Ginger presently with some heat, it was bad enough to have to wallow in gore, but that he should be expected to remain in that position with a lion roaring up and down was ridiculous. Ginger protested that he had not roared. Bertie said he thought it was a lion, anyway, which came to the same thing. He concluded by saying that he had had enough of the business.

Ginger told him that he had no desire to linger.

Everything had gone off fine with the exception of Tug's presence in the search party. This, of course, Bertie knew nothing about. He agreed with Ginger that it was tough on Tug, but nothing could be done about it.

"We'll toddle along and see him presently, and put things right," said Bertie.

Ginger reminded him that they had not quite finished the deception. There was Bertie's body to dispose of, as if it had been dragged away by a lion. There was no great difficulty about this. They trampled down the undergrowth for some distance into the forest, at the same time splashing the trail with a bunch of twigs that had been dipped

into buffalo blood. Ginger said that this would bear out the story the natives would certainly tell to explain why they had deserted their post-that they had been attacked by a lion.

"What happens if they follow the trail and fail to find the mangled remains of my poor old body at the end of it ? "

asked Bertie.

140

"They won't follow the trail," declared Ginger confidently. "No-one but a madman follows a man-eater into thick cover."

"And what's the next move in this disgusting pantomime? " inquired Bertie, wiping his eyeglass carefully with his handkerchief. "I'm all in favour of having a bath."

"That'll have to wait," replied Ginger. "We've got to make contact with Tug and let him know how things stand. It's time Biggles knew."

"That means we've got to go back to the lodge."

"There's no other way," averred Ginger. "We might as well make a start."

They walked back down the track to the open country to find the world bathed in blue moonlight. With more caution now they kept on towards the lodge; but before they had reached half way they stopped by common consent as a sudden outburst of noise set the air quivering. It was the sound of an aircraft being started up.

Ginger looked at Bertie with startled eyes. "There's only one machine here and that's Tug's," he asserted. "What's he doing? He'd hardly be testing at this time of night."

"Surely he couldn't be going back?" replied Bertie; but his voice lacked conviction.

"He might," said Ginger slowly. A moment later, as the noise of engines rose to a crescendo, he added, " He is. That machine is taking off."

Of this there was no possible room for doubt. Speechless, they stood still while the machine took off. In fact, neither spoke again until the drone of engines faded into the silence of the African night.

Somewhere in the far distance a lion roared.

141

"He's gone," muttered Ginger. "Would you believe it?"

"I'd believe anything," answered Bertie philosophically. "Absolutely anything."

## Chapter 12

### Biggles Takes A Turn

TUG had no difficulty in finding Constantino's Restaurant, a rather sordid eating—house in the Greek style with a few bedrooms available. Here, in a small private sitting—room, he found Algy, asleep. As Algy sat up, staring, Biggles came in. With an impatient gesture he threw off the clumsy burnous that he had worn over his ordinary clothes.

"I don't think you were shadowed," he told Tug. "Have you said anything to Algy ... ?"

"Not yet."

Looking at Algy, Biggles said: "Tug says Bertie's gone for a Burton."

Algy started, an expression of consternation leaping into his eyes. "What! No—not Bertie?"

"Fraid so," murmured Tug disconsolately.

Biggles dropped into a rickety basket chair and lit a cigarette. "Tell us about it," he ordered.

"I haven't had a chance to send you a report since I left England, but this is the lay-out as I see it," began Tug. "Stellar are the people you're after, or they've got a big hand in it. The show is as crooked as a dog's hind leg. They contacted me in London and in the

page 143

first conversation offered me more than double what I asked for if I'd carry what they practically told me was contraband freight—without asking questions. They also warned me that they had no compunction about bumping off pilots who tried to squeal—they had, in fact,

bumped off two recently. Stellar wasn't mentioned at this time, but in the morning I found myself in a Stellar machine bound for Cairo. I told you in my note that I was going. Is that what brought you out here? "

"Partly," answered Biggles. "You didn't mention Stellar, apparently because you weren't sure about it yourself then; but you said you were briefed for Cairo. I had a signal from Bertie and Ginger, from here, to say that they'd booked the Stellar tour to Kudinga. That was enough for me. I reckoned that if I kept an eye on the airport, and the Stellar office in particular, I should see one or the other of you. But carry on."

"I've been to Kudinga, but I didn't get a chance to speak to either Bertie or Ginger," resumed Tug. "As far as I can make out what happened was this. They got to Kudinga all right, posing as Indian Army officers, like you said. I was sent down to Kudmga with a letter for a feller named Kreeze—he seems to be the big noise at Kudinga. I handed him the letter. Imagine how I felt when he opened it in front of me and out fell photos of all of you. The shots were taken outside the Yard—I'll tell you more about that later. It so happened that Bertie and Ginger had gone out shooting.

Bertie came back alone. He told Kreeze that Ginger had sprained an ankle and had been left behind. How true that was I don't know, but that's what Bertie said. I was sent out of the office so I didn't see all that happened after that; but I do know this. Kreeze sent

page 144

Bertie out with a black hunter named Kisumo to find Ginger—at least, that was the excuse. Actually, Kreeze sent Bertie out with the deliberate intention of having him bumped off by this nasty piece of work, Kisumo. There were shots and neither of them came back. Kreeze got worried and took a party out to find them. I went along. We found a dead buffalo and two dead men—Bertie and Kisumo. Just what happened nobody knows for sure. It's unlikely we shall ever know. Kisumo may have shot Bertie before the buffalo charged. Anyway, the buffalo had the last word. Kisumo was smashed to pulp. Bertie wasn't much better—he was blood from head to foot. By this time it was dark and nothing could be done. Kreeze put a guard over the bodies with the idea of bringing them in for burial in the morning. But the guard bolted—said they were attacked by lions. That's all I know. I couldn't stay to find out any more because Kreeze sent me back here with a letter."

Biggles sat for some minutes, smoking, deep in thought, before he spoke.

"What sort of place is this Kudinga? " he asked at last.

Tug gave a brief description.

"Have you noticed any place near Kudinga where one could put a machine down with a reasonable hope of getting it off again? " inquired Biggles.

"I reckon there are plenty of places where you could get down without hurting yourself," answered Tug. " In fact, you could get down almost anywhere on the plains. But whether you would get off again is another matter. I didn't really get a chance to see what the surface of the ground is like."

"I just wondered if you knew of a place."

page 145

"No. I've hardly been off the landing area. If you landed anywhere else you might have a job to get to the lodge without being spotted. With the exception of a bit of forest where Bertie was killed it's all open country, and the lodge stands on a hill overlooking it."

Algy looked at Biggles. "What have you got in mind? " he asked.

"If Bertie's gone topsides there's nothing we can do about it," replied Biggles quietly. "I'm worried about Ginger. 'He's down there on his own, with wild beasts outside the fence and a gang of cold-blooded thugs inside. He has no means of getting away. From what you say, Tug, he doesn't even know about the photos, and that this rat Kreeze knows who we are."

"I don't see how he could possibly know," said Tug moodily.

Again Biggles thought for a moment. Then he went on. "The first thing that arises out of all this is, we've got to think fast and move fast. Kreeze, and the man behind him, must know that the police are suspicious. His first move will be to put the soft pedal on the racket even if he doesn't close it down altogether for the time being. He'll realize that there are likely to be questions asked about Bertie. He can't keep that dark. You can't kill a police officer and get away with it."

"Why not cast the net and pick up the whole bunch?" asked Algy viciously. "We know—"

"It isn't what we know, it's what we can prove that matters," interrupted Biggles. "What do we know? Tug was engaged in circumstances that were definitely shady, but what has that amounted to? He hasn't been asked to break the law—yet. Bertie may, or may not, have been killed by a buffalo. This fellow Kreeze page 146

will say that he was, and all the evidence points that way. No, we've really got nothing on these people yet. To jump in prematurely would result in them all slipping through the net."

"Kreeze as good as admitted to me that they had bumped off two pilots," reminded Tug.

"He could just as easily deny it. These people are experts at faking accidents. Where is the alleged contraband? No one has seen it. We don't know where it is or what it is. Another point: Kudinga isn't the beginning and end of this business. It must have links all over Europe. We don't know how far the ramifications go. We ourselves are not in a position to make hundreds, perhaps thousands, of arrests. When the time comes to strike that will be a job for the Air Commodore and his continental colleagues. It will take some organizing if the entire Stellar show is to be roped in.

Still, I think our investigations have advanced far enough for me to make a full report to the Air Commodore. After that the initiative will lie with him. He can please himself what he does about it. We'll carry on. I'll let him know that I'm going down to Kudinga."

"You've decided to go?" Algy asked the question.

"Of course. I'm not leaving Ginger there."

"What about me?" inquired Tug. "What do I do?"

"They don't suspect you so you might as well carry on with your job. What are you supposed to be doing now?"

"My instructions are to stand by for orders. That's what the booking clerk said when I gave him the letter I brought up."

"I should like to know what was in that letter," said Biggles softly.

"I hadn't a chance to open it. It was sealed, anyway. The booking clerk was waiting when I landed. I've got an idea that smug little guy is something more than a booking clerk."

"Did you notice who the letter was addressed to?"

"Yes. It was addressed to a Mr. White, care of Stellar Skyways, Cairo."

"What else did you bring up—anything?"

"Only some fancy trophies."

"Such as?"

"Heads and horns and skins. They'd been loaded into the luggage compartment of my machine when I brought it out to fly back. Kreeze told me he had some to go up."

Biggles looked interested. "Where are these things now? "

"I imagine they will have been unloaded and put into the Stellar office. If they haven't, then they're still in the machine.

I suppose they'll go on to the people who own them. I noticed they were all labelled."

"What was on the labels?"

"I didn't look to see. I wasn't interested. I couldn't get poor old Bertie out of my mind. I noticed the labels, that's all."

"I'd like to have a look at those trophies," said Biggles slowly. "How many people are there employed in the Stellar office? "

"I couldn't be sure of that," returned Tug. "There's the head clerk—a ropery type, if ever I saw one. He's got an assistant who does the books, and there are some outside men, Egyptians they look like, who service the machines."

"Where do these people hang out?"

page 148

"I've no idea."

"I mean, does it look as if they might sleep on the premises?"

"Judging from the size of the place, I should say not."

Biggles looked at his watch. "I wonder could we get into this place," he murmured. "I imagine it will be locked up for the night now. They wouldn't be likely to maintain a twenty-four hour service. I'll tell you what. Tug, whatever happens you mustn't be seen with us. You stay here. You've got all the gen at your finger tips. Write me out a report for the Air Commodore. I'll sign it and get it flown to England nght away. Algy and I are going to the airport. If we're not back by daylight you forget about us and carry on with your job."

"Okay."

"We shall try to get back in time to see you, of course." Biggles got up. "Come on, Algy—let's get cracking. I don't know how long this job will take—depends on whether we can get in or not. We shan't be able to force the door or windows or it will be known that an attempt was made to break in. We'll make a reconnaissance and, then proceed according to what we find. Let's go. See you later, Tug. If it should so happen that we don't come back you can sign the report for me. Take it to Headquarters Middle East and ask for Air Marshal Laggan. Tell him I sent you and say that I'd be obliged if he'd rush the report home by special courier. You'd better try to snatch some sleep."

"I could do with some," admitted Tug wearily.

"Are we going as we are?" asked Algy, picking up a burnous.

"I don't think we shall want those things any more," replied Biggles.

It was only a short walk to the airport, and then a few minutes were sufficient to confirm what Biggles had suspected.

The Stellar offices were shut, locked, and in darkness. Every door and window had been made secure.

"It's no use," said Algy. " We shall have to take to carrying skeleton keys in our kit."

"Let's try the hangar," suggested Biggles. That, too, was locked.

Biggles shrugged. " There are more ways than one of killing cats, and that goes for most things," he said tritely. "Let's try another way." He set off at a brisk walk.

"Where are we going? " asked Algy.



"To the city."

"It's a fair walk."

"I'm going to stop a car," declared Biggles. "We can't afford to waste time hiking."

Several cars were moving about, mostly travelling towards the city. Biggles stopped one. An army officer sat at the wheel. He looked as if he had been to a party. At any rate, he was in a cheerful mood and offered willingly to drive them to their hotel. He looked a trifle startled when Biggles told him that they didn't want an hotel, but Police Headquarters.

"Lost your watch or something?" queried the officer nonchalantly, as they got in.

"You've guessed it in one," answered Biggles evenly, responding to the man's mood.

The officer was as good as his word and put them down at Police Headquarters.

## Chapter 13

### A Thief To Catch A Thief

Biggles and Algy found a Major Grattan on duty. In his private office Biggles introduced himself and Algy and showed their special C.I.D. passes. These, as the saying is, made the Major sit up and take notice.

"It must be something pretty serious to bring you out here," he observed, looking hard at Biggles. "We've heard of you, of course. That Abyssinian affair, which you cleaned up, made a bit of a stir in this part of the world. The Department is at your service. What can I do for you? "

Biggles smiled faintly. "I have an unusual request to make," he answered. "I want you to tell me the name and address of the cleverest housebreaker in Cairo."

The Major stared, as well he might. "You want a burglar? "

"That's right—a fellow who can open locked doors." Suddenly the Major laughed. "Well, you've certainly come to the right place," he

asserted. "I should say in that respect Cairo can hold its own with any city in the world. You're in luck.

It so happens that our most brilliant exponent is right on the spot. We had occasion to pick him up last night on suspicion ... loitering with intent—you know? "

" Nothing definite against him?"

"Actually—no."

page 151

"Then if he did a good job for us you might let him off with a caution?"

"It could be arranged, no doubt."

"What's his name?"

"Abdullah ibn Abu."

"A native!"

"An Arab. A quaint character—likeable in a way. He'd be a good type if only he could keep out of mischief."

"Does he speak English?"

"Oh yes. Would you like me to have him brought in.

"Thanks."

The Major touched a bell. It was answered by an orderly. He went out, and presently returned with a tall, portly, middle-aged Arab, whose dignified poise was well matched by an expression of utter indifference.

Laying a hand on his heart he looked at the Major and said gravely, in a deep sonorous voice: "Effendi, as ever I am at thy command."

The Major indicated Biggles. "Abdullah, here is an officer who seeks a service in the business in which you excel.

Serve him well and you will be rewarded. When the matter is ended you will return here to me, and not seek a hiding-



“Effendi, as ever I am at thy command”

place in the kasbah."

"Call upon the Prophet, I swear it," said Abdullah earnestly.

Major Grattan turned to Biggles. "You'd better tell him what you want him to do. Shall I stay, or would you rather talk to him alone?"

"Stay by all means," replied Biggles. "We are engaged on a case in

which your department may be involved at any moment." To Abdullah he said: "This is a private matter between us."

page 152

(illustration)

page 153

"May my tongue shrivel if I speak of it," returned Abdullah simply.

"It is a matter of opening a door that is locked," went on Biggles.

"Could that be managed? "

Abdullah drew himself up to his full height. "Could it be managed? By the Face of God, what talk is this? " he asked wonderingly. "Since when was there a door for which I, Abdullah ibn Abu, could not find a key?"

"If you can so easily open doors, why did you not open the door of your cell and walk away? " inquired Biggles sceptically.

"I was about to do so, effendi. I waited only for the most convenient hour," asserted Abdullah calmly.

Major Grattan leaned forward. "And what," he asked coldly, "were you going to use for a key?" From under his gumbaz Abdullah produced a nail and a piece of wire.

The Major frowned. "Where did you get those?"

"From the broom which I, thy humble servant, am expected to use to keep clean the floor of the lodging into which thou has cast me," explained Abdullah. "The broom had been mended in a careless fashion," he added naively.

Biggles rose. "Let us go," he said. Of the Major he inquired: "Is there a car handy that I can use? It would save time."

" You can borrow mine," offered the Major. "You'll find it outside."

" Thanks," said Biggles. "This way, Abdullah." Biggles drove the car to the airport and stopped in the inky shadow of a hangar. Then, on foot, they went on to the offices of Stellar Skyways. Pointing to the building Biggles said: "This is the place that I wish to enter. But no signs must be left of our visit."

"W'allah! Signs, effendi? By the Truth of God, there shall be no more than those left by a jackal in a stony wadi,"

promised Abdullah.

He set to work. In five minutes the door was open.

He stepped back. "Enter," he invited. "What is thy pleasure now?"

"Guard the door and warn me if anyone comes" ordered Biggles. Then, to Algy: "Come on—we haven't too much time."

They went in through the open door, Biggles closing it, but not latching it, behind him. Then, switching on a torch, but holding the light down, he looked around. One glance told him what he wanted to know.

"This is the public booking office," he said quietly. "We're not likely to find anything here."

There was a door at the far side of the room. He walked over to it and turned the handle. It was locked. "Fetch Abdullah," he ordered. "You'd better keep cave until I send him back."

Algy went out, and presently Abdullah came in.

Biggles pointed to the door. "Can you manage this one?" he asked.

"The makers of locks are cheats and swindlers which is something I have never been," remarked Abdullah with his lordly air. "For what is the use of a lock that can be turned by a thief?" he asked, almost plaintively. "Still, doubtless God knows best."

"Doubtless," agreed Biggles. "But don't talk so much. Can you open the door?"

"If it is the Will of God," said Abdullah piously. Three minutes later the door swung slowly open.

Abdullah bowed and withdrew. When Algy came back Biggles was in the inner office, going through the papers on the desk.

"I don't see the letter Tug brought up—the one addressed to White,"

remarked Biggles. "As it was urgent it has probably been delivered, which must mean that White lives hereabouts."

They found nothing of interest in the desk. There were letters, but they all appeared to refer to legitimate business.

Biggles said he was not surprised. It was hardly to be expected that incriminating documents would be left lying about.

"Somewhere there should be a complete record of everyone employed by the company," remarked Algy. "It would be needed for the pay-roll."

"If we could get hold of that we should have the master-key of the whole business, but I don't expect we shall find it here," returned Biggles. "Notice the two telephones—one on the desk and one on the wall. That one on the wall is a private wire. It must connect with somebody important. We'll remember it. What's in here?" As he spoke he walked over to a big, built-in cupboard. His torch revealed a number of miscellaneous parcels, conspicuous among which were a number of big game trophies.

"Looks like the luggage department," observed Algy.

"Evidently," answered Biggles. "Seems to be quite a lot of stuff here, too, as if Cairo was a bottle-neck in the organization. Ah—of course. I remember Tug saying that the company has been short of pilots. That would account for it. Stuff would pile up."

"Why Cairo particularly?"

"Because it's here, don't forget, that the Hunters' Tour links up with the Old World Tour, which operates over Europe.

Today is Thursday. The European tour calls here every Saturday. When it comes I page 156

imagine it clears this stuff. By the way, do you notice a queer smell?"

Algy sniffed. "Now you mention it. A musty smell, mixed up with moth balls."

"Does it remind you of anything?"

"I can't say that it does."

"I've smelt that same smell before, and recently," declared Biggles. "Your nose seldom lets you down. It takes you back to a scene quicker than any other sense. Wait a minute, let me think. By thunder! I've got it! Something in here has the same smell as the stamps and notes you saw me examining the other day in Mount Street. Or let's put it the other way round. The stamps had the same peculiar aroma as something in this cupboard. That can't be coincidence.

Hold the light."

While Algy held the torch Biggles examined the contents of the cupboard, but without finding anything of interest.

"Strange," he said in a baffled voice. "The thing must be here somewhere. Hold hard. I've got an idea." As he spoke he lifted out the grinning mask of a leopard and turned it round slowly in his hands. "This has been preserved, but not properly mounted yet," he observed. "Of course, in this condition it would be easier to transport home. Notice how the skin has been sewn up at the back of the neck, with enough hide left over for it to be mounted on a wood shield.

What's this?" He turned over a label that was attached. There was writing on it and he read it aloud. "General Sir Yardley Simmonds, K.C.B., D.S.O., Barrington Hall, Leicester. . via Samuel Cassar & Co., Taxidermists, Bantock Place, London E.C.4. That last part is printed," he observed. "Only the General's name is written. That can only page 157

mean that stuff must go to Cassar & Co. regularly. What do you make of that?"

"There can't be anything wrong with the General's stuff," declared Algy. "He's a member of the Army Council. That puts him above suspicion."

"Exactly—above suspicion," murmured Biggles in a curious voice. "I wonder ... ? Show a light."

Taking out his penknife he carefully cut enough of the stitches at the back of the leopard's head to enable him to insert three fingers. Algy, watching, saw him withdraw a flat object that was presently revealed to be a closely-pressed packet of paper.

There was a brief interval of silence. Then Biggles said, in a voice that was brittle with sudden understanding "Fivers!

This is it! We've got it. What a scheme. Simple, yet bar accidents, foolproof."

"You're not going to suggest that the General is in the racket, are you?" asked Algy incredulously.

"Of course not," answered Biggles quickly. "But it's all as plain now as the sun in the sky. Don't you see, the General's name is good enough to get the stuff through. This is how it works. This stuff has come up from Kudinga. The General must have been down there, hunting. The notes are being printed there. The trophies are roughly cured there, and the notes sewn into them. They are then sent on here. Of course, the owners of the trophies know nothing about the notes.

But this is the clever part. The trophies are addressed to the homes of the owners, and their names are important enough to see them through customs. But before going home the trophies go first to a taxidermist for final dressing and setting up. He's the racketeer. He distributes the stuff and so gets it into circulation. Afterwards, no doubt, the trophies page 158

are sent on to the homes of their rightful owners. In that way spurious notes could be introduced into any country in the world. This is the receiving depot from Kudinga. From here I should say the stuff is picked up by the Old World Tour and delivered in the relevant country. We can soon check up on that. Let's look at some of these labels. Show the light."

In quick succession Biggles read out the addresses.

Paris—Rome—Istanbul—New York—London. Okay, that's all we want to know."

"But wouldn't the customs people feel something inside these skins?" queried Algy.

"Possibly—but they would assume it to be stuffing, which in fact it is. The things have to be stuffed, but the customs people would hardly expect the stuffing to consist—as in this case—of five-pound notes. Customs officers are pretty thorough, but I doubt if they would think it necessary to pull to pieces the property of a man like, say, General Sir Yardley Simmonds. Anyway, It seems to have worked. No doubt in the ordinary way, when the company has plenty of pilots and machines available, the trophies actually travel up with their owners, which would make it easier still. But we're wasting time. This is really all we need to know. With a full list of the company's precious



taxidermists the police can rope in every distributing centre; and by sitting in the taxidermists' shops they can catch every private distributor as he comes in. Hold the light while I copy down these names and addresses."

With Algy holding the torch Biggles wrote fast in his notebook.

"You're not going to touch this stuff then?" asked Algy.

page 159

"Not likely. We'll leave it just as it is. It can go on. I'll advise Raymond. He no doubt will notify the police on the continent, who, by swooping on the stuff as it is delivered, will catch the crooks with the goods on them. Okay, that's all. Let's tidy up and get out."

Biggles drew the threads and arranged the leopard skin so that the incision he had made did not show. The trophies were then returned to the cupboard as they had been found. Having satisfied himself that nothing was out of place Biggles made for the door. "Abdullah can lock up behind us," he said.

By the time this was done, and they had returned to the car, the stars were paling in the east. Without speaking, engrossed in thought, Biggles drove back to Police Headquarters where Abdullah was handed over to Major Grattan, who was just going off duty.

"Here's your prisoner," Biggles told the police officer. "He's done a good job. Let him off lightly. He's a useful man."

You might do worse than take him on your staff."

"It's an idea. I hadn't thought of it," admitted the Major.

"The Hand of God is in this," swore Abdullah earnestly. "If I were free," he added pensively, "my mother would not suffer grief."

"Go to her, and see that you do not again give her cause for grief," said the Major sternly.

Abdullah touched his forehead and then his heart. "Upon my head be it," said he.

"Forget what you have seen tonight," ordered Biggles. "Effendi, it is already forgotten," returned Abdullah, and went out into the dawn.

Biggles thanked the Major for his co-operation and followed Abdullah

to the street.

page 160

"Now what?" asked Algy.

"Let's get back to Tug," answered Biggles. "We're cutting things fine."

They found Tug just about to seal his report. Biggles told him to leave it open as he had something more to add. Then, sitting down, he wrote rapidly for some minutes before sealing the envelope. Looking up at Algy he said, "Sorry, laddie, but I shall have to ask you to go flat out for home. Take the Mosquito that brought us out—you should do the trip comfortably in seven hours. See Raymond. Give him this report. Tell him all you know. He must act as he thinks best. I've given him the names and addresses of the taxiderrmists, and told him what they really are, so he may decide to strike right away."

Algy took the envelope. "Where shall I find you when I get back? "

"Kudinga," answered Biggles. " You can tell Raymond that, too. Get cracking. I've got to have a few words with Tug before he goes to work."

"I'll be seeing you," promised Algy as he departed.

## Chapter 14

### Events At Kudinga

AFTER the drone of the departing Pacemaker had faded to silence Ginger and Bertie stood for a little while gazing in the direction of the lodge, conspicuous by its lights, not expecting to see anything but thinking there was just a chance that they might. At length Ginger turned away with a casual, "Well, that's that."

page 161

"Here, I say, where are you going?" asked Bertie.

"We might as well stroll back to the forest."

"But what about my nauseating pants?"

"What about them?"

"Don't you think I might slip up to the lodge and have a quick bath and change?"

"That would be a daft thing to do," declared Ginger. "You couldn't get in, anyway. They'll have locked the gate by now. If we're wise we'll keep well away from the place."

"I thought I might just slip in without anybody seeing me—"

"Nothing doing."

"Then what are we going to do? I mean, where are we going to sleep, and all that? Do you realize I haven't a razor?"

"Better to have a bit of stubble on your chin than a knife in your ribs."

"But that's all very fine," protested Bertie. "Where are we going to find a roof to get under? "

"As far as I know," answered Ginger, "there's only one roof, apart from the lodge, for several hundred miles, and that's the power-house. This might be the opportunity to give it the once-over. The engine isn't running or we should hear it, which I take to mean there's no one there. I shouldn't think anyone sleeps there. Aside from that, it would be a more comfortable place to pass the night than out on the plain or in the forest."

"If there's no one there the place will be locked."

"We'll break in."

"If we do that, when the crooks come in the morning they'll know we've been around."

"So what? As far as we're concerned the game's

page 162

up. If Kreeze gets his hands on us we're sunk, any how, so we've nothing to lose. He's bound to organize a search for me in the morning, as soon as it gets light. Maybe he won't think of looking in the power-house."

"But isn't the power-house inside the fence?"

"Yes. But if you remember I told you there's a place where the fence has been knocked flat by a fallen tree."

"Where the bally buffaloes go in and out? That doesn't sound a very good place to me, old boy."

"Perhaps there aren't any more. I'm pretty sure that the one that came for me was a solitary old bull."

"I hope you're right, by gad. What about the snakes—the puff-adders and things? I'd rather argue with that crooked crook Kreeze in daylight than with a puff-adder in the dark—yes, by Jove! Every time."

Ginger hesitated. "There may be snakes," he agreed. "But we're quite likely to step on one anywhere if we go blundering about in the dark. Can you make any alternative suggestion?"

"How about finding a good tree and squatting in it?"

"You seem to forget that I've spent most of the day in a tree," returned Ginger coldly. "That was enough for me. But there's no sense in standing here. Let's drift back to the forest for a start. I'll tell you something else. If we go down to the power-house you could wash your pants in the water of the lake. You might even give your precious body a swill down."

"Now you're talking," declared Bertie with enthusiasm. "I could collect my rifle on the way."

"Are you crazy?"

"What's wrong with that, old boy?"

"Kreeze knows the rifle is there. In the morning,

page 163

if he found it gone, being well aware that lions and hyenas don't walk about with rifles, he'd know I wasn't far away,"

Ginger pointed out sarcastically."

"Ah! Of course. Absolutely—silly ass that I am," muttered Bertie.

"Perhaps, old boy, as you've got a rifle, you wouldn't mind walking in front, in case we barge into anything—if you see what I mean?"

"I see what you mean all right," returned Ginger, taking the lead.

By this time they were well on their way back towards the forest, which lay like a great sinister wall across their path.

Reaching it, they held on through dappled moonlight along the track, for it was Ginger's intention to go first to the scene of the affair with the buffalo as this was the only landmark he knew which would be a guide to the gap in the fence. Striking down the hill from that point would bring him to it, or close enough to enable him to find it. But as they drew near, certain sounds caused him to change his mind.

"Here, I say, what's going on?" asked Bertie. They stood still to listen. From no great distance along the track came a sound of tearing, and deep-throated purring, punctuated by an occasional growl.

"That sounds like lions to me," murmured Ginger.

"How revolting."

"In a way it's a good thing," said Ginger. "By the time Kreeze arrives in the morning the lions will have left ample evidence of their visit. That will lend colour to our plan for leading him to think that you finished up by providing a lion with his rations."

"I wish you wouldn't keep reminding me of that," protested Bertie. "You seem to take a positive delight in a picture of a lion running round with me in his

page 164

mouth. How are you going to find your way to the gap, now?"

"I'm not going any nearer to that beanfeast, that's certain," declared Ginger. "We shall have to cut straight down the hill from here, and when we come to the fence, make our way along it to the fallen tree."

"It's going to be perfectly foul groping about in the bushes," observed Bertie. "It'll be as dark as the inside of a black cow under those trees. Wouldn't it be better to wait for daylight?"

"As soon as it starts to get light there will be people moving about," answered Ginger. "Someone may go to the powerhouse. Besides, if we wait here, the lions may go home this way. That wouldn't be funny."

"No, by Jove! You're right there—absolutely," agreed Bertie readily. "All right. Let's toddle along. The sooner we're out of this bally menagerie the better. And to think that when I was a kid I used to pay

to go to the zoo! Watch out for snakes. Tell me if you collide with anything that feels like one."

"I'll tell you," promised Ginger grimly.

They turned off the track into the forest, and with hands held in front of them to protect their eyes, groped a way through the undergrowth. It had been dark on the track, although a little moonlight filtering through the trees had helped matters; but in the forest proper the darkness was utter and complete. Had it not been for the slope of the ground their task would have been hopeless, but the fall of the land did at least keep them going in the right direction without possibility of a mistake. After a very trying hour Ginger announced with intense satisfaction that they had reached the wire. They rested for a few minutes, taking the opportunity page 165

to relieve themselves of some of the thorns they had collected on the way.

Then, turning left, Ginger set off again, now feeling his way along the wire. It was a slow and tedious journey. They were nearly an hour reaching their objective, a period of time which, towards the finish, began for Ginger to assume the unreal character of a nightmare. He felt that he had been groping his way along a wire fence in the dark all his life.

Again they rested for a few minutes before going on through the gap and down the final slope to the bamboos. These grew so thickly that it was not easy to force a passage through them. To keep any sort of watch for snakes was out of the question; they were a risk that had to be taken; and an occasional rustle on one side or the other told them that even if there were no snakes about, they were not alone in the swamp. It was therefore with heartfelt relief that they came at last to a place where the bamboos thinned out and enabled them to see the sky. They went on a little way, and there, plain to see in a flood of blue moonlight, was their objective, the power-house.

Bertie sat down, took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. "By Jove ! old boy; that was a bit of a scramble—

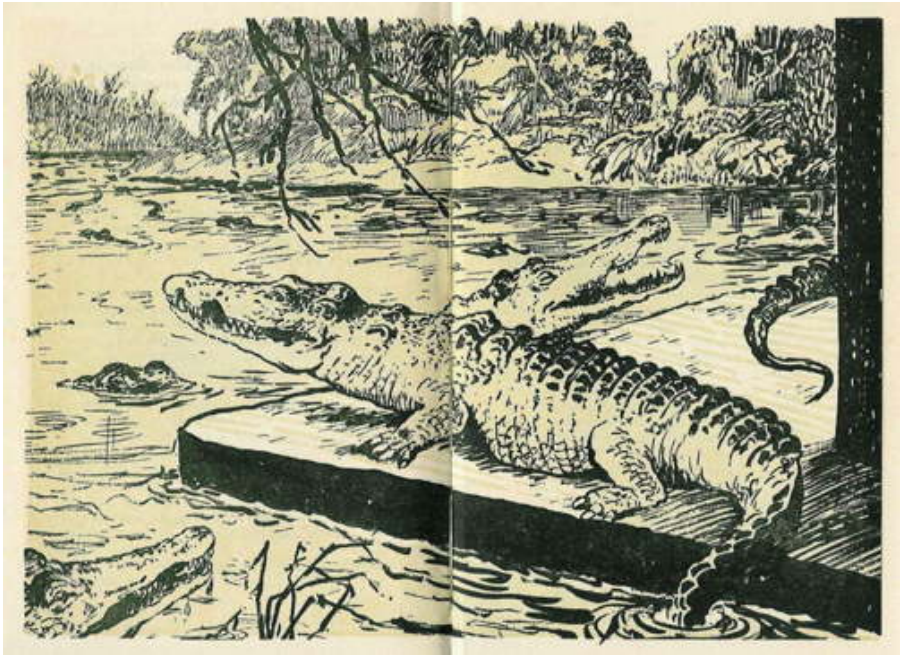
what?"

Ginger did not answer. He was looking hard at the power-house, or rather, at the deck that surrounded it. There seemed to be something different. The deck looked black, and uneven. There was, too, a ripple on the water in the immediate vicinity which at first he could not

understand. When he did grasp the truth he drew in his breath with a gasp of dismay. "For heaven's sake!" he muttered. "Look at that! The place is crawling with crocodiles!"

page 166

Bertie started. Adjusting his monocle he surveyed the scene. "How absolutely loathsome," he muttered. "Why didn't I think of it? In Africa, where there's water there are usually crocs."



"They're all over the confounded deck."

"They probably think the bally place was built for 'em."

"There is this about it," remarked Ginger, trying to take an optimistic view. "There's no one inside or they wouldn't be there."

"Absolutely," agreed Bertie. " But will you tell me this? How am I going to wash my pants? "

"Oh, dash your pants," snapped Ginger. "I'm more concerned with getting rid of these brutes. There mustn't be any shooting or it will be heard at the lodge."

" We'll shoo them away," decided Bertie. "When they see me the

blighters will run like rabbits. You watch."

Looking about he found a fallen branch, a fairly—heavy piece of dead wood. Whirling it round his head he ran straight at the power-house uttering a volley of uncouth noises—shorrock—gerrup—brrr. Releasing his hold on the branch he sent it crashing among the reptiles.

The result of this attack was alarming in its success.

The crocodiles rose up with one accord and plunged into the water, leaving the floating part of the power-house rocking. Ripples surged across the placid surface of the lake in concentric rings to die upon the distant reed-fringed banks. In a few minutes everything had settled, and peace reigned.

"Good. Let's go down," suggested Ginger. "We've wasted an awful lot of time."

"Absolutely," returned Bertie. "And I'll tell you

page 167

something else. The mosquitos are tearing lumps off the back of my neck and flying away with them, the little wretches."

Watching where they put their feet they made their way down to the power-house and walked across the planks, still wet from its recent occupiers, to the door. Drawing his revolver in case it should be needed, Ginger knocked. There was no answer, so he tried the handle. "Nothing doing," he said. "It's locked. That means there's no one at home. Let's see if we can find another way in."

They walked round the structure examining the winndows, hoping to find one open. But everyone had been tightly fastened from the inside. What puzzled Ginger was, as he pointed out to Bertie, on the floating section of the powerhouse the window frames were steel, and fitted so closely that it was impossible to insert a knife blade between them and the woodwork. "The only thing I can think of is, this is the part that houses the stuff they don't want anyone to see," he remarked. "Well, if we're going in, there's only one thing to do, and that's smash one of the windows. It's no use messing about." As he spoke he walked along to the end window—the window on the floating section farthest from the door—and raised the butt of his revolver with the obvious intention of carrying out his design.



"Here, I say, just a minute," said Bertie, in a voice stiff with alarm.  
"The bally crocs are coming back!"

Ginger, still with his arm raised, looked over his shoulder at the water. Several little rings of ripples, with two dark projections in the middle of each, indicated clearly the cause of Bertie's concern.

"The brutes are watching us," went on Bertie.

page 168

"They're the most precocious crocs I've ever seen. What do they want?"

"They're probably hoping to get a taste of your pants," Ginger told him lightly. Then he added seriously: "No doubt they're used to people working here. Take my rifle and keep it handy in case they try to come aboard."

"I'm not so sure that I like standing on this ganggway," said Bertie anxiously. "One might decide to make a grab at me."

"All right. You'd better come inside when I've smashed the glass," suggested Ginger.

He ended the debate by striking the glass with the butt of his revolver. To his surprise it did not break. "They put in some pretty tough stuff while they were about it," he remarked, and repeated the blow with more violence. This time he was successful, and glass tinkled as it fell inside the building. "I wonder why they used plate glass?" he muttered, as he started knocking off the jagged ends, which would still make entry difficult if not dangerous. This done, he took out his torch, and putting an arm through the window switched it on, keeping the beam down to lessen the chances of reflected light being seen from the lodge. A quick survey revealed a machine mounted on a bench, with sundry instruments and rolls of paper lying about.

"I'm going in," he announced. "Are you coming?"

"You bet I am," answered Bertie. "These crocs have definitely got a whiff of my pants." He held the rifle while Ginger climbed through the window; then he passed the weapon through and followed.

One minute was sufficient to confirm all the suspicions Ginger had ever entertained about the place, for the dominant feature was what he knew must be a printing

machine. It was compact and highly elaborate. He had never seen one before, but a neat pile of plain paper, and some specimen printings, revealed its purpose. He picked up an American ten dollar bill and held it for Bertie to see. On another bench were arranged a number of flat copper plates; attached to each one by a rubber band was a piece of paper, presumably the design it printed. These designs were notes of several nationalities. Among others he noticed Italian lira, Greek drachmae and Spanish pesetas. In the far corner of the room was an instrument like a camera and some small sheets of copper. On a shelf were cans of printers' inks of various colours. He understood now the inky fingers of the operator.

"This is it," he told Bertie. "This is where the dud stuff is printed. There must be a power unit in the next compartment.

I imagine it supplies the lodge with electricity, and when required runs this printing outfit. We can't get into the next room because the door's locked—not that it really matters." Ginger had walked over and was trying the door. "Seems a pretty substantial sort of door, too," he observed. "The place is built like a safe. This door looks like metal. What the deuce would they want a metal door for?"

"To prevent anyone who happened to get in through the front door from coming in here," suggested Bertie.

"No matter," returned Ginger. "We've seen all we need to see."

"And what are we going to do about it now we've seen it?" inquired Bertie. "The first operator who comes here in the morning will know someone has been in."

"Can't help that," replied Ginger. "If we can get clear of this place our evidence alone should be enough page 170

to put paid to the racket. I'll take some of these odd notes to support our statement. If arrangements can be made to raid the place before this stuff can be dismantled and hidden, so much the better. If the gang takes fright and hides everything—and that I fancy would take a bit of doing—these notes will take some explaining." As he spoke Ginger made a quick collection of notes, folded them into a tight wad and put it in his breast pocket.

A few more minutes were spent making a thorough examination of the

place; then Bertie announced that it was four o'clock.

Ginger drew a deep breath. "Well, I call that a good night's work."

Bertie agreed. "What's the best thing to do now?"

"Stay here," replied Ginger. "We're better off in here than anywhere outside. There won't be anything doing until it gets light; we can't do anything ourselves if it comes to that. It wouldn't be a bad idea if we settled down and had a rest while things are quiet. Goodness knows when we shall get another chance."

"Absolutely," said Bertie. "I'm all for it. We've been on the trot for nearly twenty-four hours and the old legs are getting a bit loose at the joints."

For lack of more comfortable accommodation they sat on the floor with their backs against the wall.

Neither was really to blame for what followed.

Although the subject had not been mentioned both were desperately tired. The events of that day alone would have been exhausting, but since leaving London they had had practically no regular sleep. It was now early morning after a night of no sleep at all, and in the matter of loss of sleep there is a definite limit to what nature will permit. Ginger of course had no

page 171

intention of going to sleep, or he would have taken the obvious precaution of suggesting that they took turn at keeping guard. And the same with Bertie. The idea was that they should take a rest while the opportunity offered; but in the circumstances it was fatal. Conversation flagged. Silence fell. In a few minutes they were both in a deep dreamless sleep.

How long they would have slept had nothing occurred to break their slumber is a matter for conjecture. Nature may not have exacted her full toll, and having got them at her mercy it is not unlikely that they would have slept the clock round. It so happened however that they were awakened by a sharp, abrupt sound, rather as if a cupboard door had been slammed.

Ginger, coming out of a deep sleep, could still hear the sound, so to speak; but he had no idea of what had caused it.

He could only think that something had fallen. He was disturbed but not seriously alarmed, for the room was in pitch darkness, and he assumed, paturally, that dawn had not yet broken. What did strike him as odd was that it should be so dark, when the windows at least should be revealed as squares of moonlight. This was all the more strange because he had a feeling that he had been asleep for a long time. He did not speak, but looked at his watch, the dial of which was luminous. He started, and stared again. He held it to his ear to make sure that it had not stopped. The tick told him that it was still going. He switched on his torch and looked again at the dial. The hands pointed to a quarter past twelve.

By this time he was sitting up. "Bertie," he said tersely. "Are you awake?"

"Definitely," answered Bertie in a normal voice. "What was that noise?"

"I don't know," replied Ginger. "Would you mind looking at your watch and telling me the time? Someething seems to have gone wrong with mine." He passed the torch.

He could see the glow on Bertie's watch, but several seconds passed before he got a reply to his question. Then, in a curious voice, Bertie said: "Something seems to have gone wrong with mine, too."

"Is it going?"

"Yes."

"What's the time by it?"

" Quarter past twelve."

Ginger sprang to his feet. "Holy smoke! If it's that time why is it still dark? Something's happened—but I don't know what."

It did not take him long to discover the truth.

Automatically he made for the window by which they had entered. It was not there—at least, there was no cavity.

Incredulous, he looked again, holding his torch close. Then, and only then, did the explanation burst. upon him. The window frame was there, but the opening was filled, so that not a crack of light showed anywhere, by a metal blind.

He tried to move it, but it was as rigid as the door of a safe.

By this time Bertie had joined him. "You know, old boy, we ought to be kicked from here to Cairo for going to sleep and letting ourselves be bowled out like this," he remarked sadly.

"Our punishment for that folly is likely to be worse than kicking," Ginger told him bitterly. "You realize what's happened? The windows have been sealed off. We're shut in."

"Absolutely—like a brace of sardines in a petrol can."

"How did they do it without waking us up?"

[illustration]

page 173

"It must have been done by a remote switch. Anyone coming in would have seen us. The noise we heard was the metal blinds falling on the windows.

"But if it's after twelve, why has no one been in here?"

"Something serious must have happened at the lodge—that's the only explanation I can think of," returned Ginger moodily.

"But why shut us in? If they knew we were here they could have bumped us off in their own time. They could have potted us through the bally window."

"There's only one answer to that," declared Ginger.

"They didn't know we were in here. I imagine there's a full strength search going on for me. Not knowing about the gap made by the fallen tree they wouldn't suppose I could get here even if I wanted to. If you asked my opinion I'd say something has gone wrong at the lodge and they've suspended operations until the thing has been cleared up. But what's the use of guessing? The one fact that sticks out a mile is, we're in a jam of no small dimensions. We'd better start trying to find a way out. You keep an eye on the door and be ready to deal with anyone who opens it." Ginger swayed suddenly and put a hand against the wall to steady himself. He looked at Bertie with startled eyes. "What the deuce was that? Did the whole place move or did I imagine it?"

"It moved, laddie. Must be a bally earthquake going on—as if we

haven't got enough to think about!"

"The place might rock a bit if someone stepped on to the decking," suggested Ginger thoughtfully.

"Crocs, perhaps."

"Crocs my foot!" cried Ginger. "We're afloat! We're moving!" An idea struck him. "I've got it,"

page 174

he went on tersely. "What fools we are. We're in the part that's mounted on pontoons. It has been cast off. They're moving it to another berth."

"Why?"

"What's the use of asking me? It may be so that should anyone come here—well, the thing won't be here. It'll be somewhere else, some place where it can't be seen. Get the idea?"

"Not entirely," admitted Bertie frankly. "Sorry to be so slow in the uptake, old boy, but where can they take it on the lake where it couldn't be seen from the bank?"

Ginger looked down at the floor, which had taken on a slight list. He could hear water gurgling and bubbling under his feet. Suddenly the whole structure lurched.

The only possible explanation struck him with the force of a physical blow. He stared at Bertie with eyes wide with horror. "I know where they're going to put it," he said in a dry voice. "I understand now why the windows were sealed."

"You mean—you know where we're going?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Where?"

"To the bottom. They're sinking the whole caboodle. They've opened valves in the pontoons. That gurgling noise is water pouring into them."

There was silence for perhaps half a minute. Then Bertie picked up Ginger's rifle.

"What are you going to do with that?" asked Ginger in surprise.

"Punch some holes in this bally shutter," returned Bertie. "The metal can't be so thick as all that—if you see what I mean? Stand clear in case the bullet ricochets."

page 175

Ginger's voice rose high in dismay. "Are you out of your mind?"

"If I'm only going to let some daylight in".

"You will also," said Ginger grimly, "let the water in."

"She may not have sunk as deep as that yet."

"But when she does? "

"It'll be over all the quicker," replied Bertie, almost cheerfully. "I never was anything for the submarine service, old boy. No bally fear. I'm all for having some fresh air while it lasts—yes, by Jove!" He raised the rifle and took rough aim.

Ginger stepped back and put his hands over his ears.

Three shots filled the chamber with a roar like thunder.

## Chapter 15

### Biggles Takes Charge

'As soon as Algy had departed on his long-distance errand Biggles turned to Tug and as concisely as possible told him the result of the reconnaissance.

"We've got to get really cracking, and that means taking chances," he went on quickly. "I've got to get to Kudinga. At a pinch I could go down in Ginger's Beau which he told me in his message he had parked at Almaza. But if I do that I shan't for obvious reasons be able to land anywhere near the lodge. If I land some distance away I shall not only be faced with a long walk, but run the risk of not being able to get off again—even if I got down without a crack-up.

Apart

from that, from what you tell me it would be a tricky business to get close to the lodge without being spotted."

"It would," assented Tug.

"That's why I've decided to go down in your Pacemaker."

"But suppose I'm not sent to Kudinga?"

"We shall go there just the same," replied Biggles calmly. "With things happening there, though, it seems a fair guess that you will be sent back. It's likely that the urgent letter you brought up will call for a reply."

"Even so, how are you going to work it?" inquired Tug.

"I shall go down to the airport wearing a burnous over my ordinary clothes," explained Biggles. "With all sorts of people of the country about no one will notice me. I shall hang about as near as seems reasonably safe to the Stellar office, or the hangar. Now then. You go and report for orders. If nothing is said about going to Kudinga stroll outside and light a cigarette. If you are to go to Kudinga drop your handkerchief. If you are going down with an empty machine pick the handkerchief up. If by any chance you have to take a passenger, or passengers, leave the handkerchief where it falls as if you hadn't noticed it. Have you got that clear?"

"Clear enough."

"Good. Now comes the question of getting me on board. If you're taking an empty machine it will be easy. Taxi down to the far end of the airfield and I'll get aboard there. Rev your engines once or twice as you go to create an impression that you're not quite satisfied, in case anybody should be watching you. That's your excuse for the long run. If you have to

page 177

take a passenger it's going to be a bit more difficult. Obviously, I couldn't get aboard after the machine leaves the tarmac. The best chance would be in the hangar when you go to get it out. I'll do the stowaway trick in the luggage compartment. It won't be comfortable travelling but we can't help that. I'm hoping you'll go down empty, in which case I shall be able to relax in the cabin while you do the



work."

"What about when we get to Kudinga?"

"All you have to do is put the machine in the hangar and leave me there. The advantage of the plan is, it puts me right on the spot. You go to Kreeze and report. If you learn anything all you will have to do is step out and tell me what's cooking."

"Just now you talked about taking chances," observed Tug dubiously. "This sounds like sheer lunacy."

Biggles brushed aside the objection. "It shouldn't be as difficult as it may sound. You're in the clear, remember. You've served them well so far so they won't be watching you—at least, not as closely as they did at first."

"Suppose there are some aircraft hands in the hangar here? They'll see you get aboard."

"Turf them out. Give them something to do—anything you like, for a couple of minutes. That'll be all the time I shall need. The big risk will come when you taxi out to the office, when it may be decided to put some last minute luggage on board. It's to dodge that risk that I made the suggestion about you picking me up at the far end of the airfield, although that can only be done if you're flying solo. I'm not likely to enjoy sitting on the floor of the luggage compartment all the way to Kudinga, you may be sure."

page 178

Tug nodded. "Okay, chief, you know best."

"Sure you've got it all clear?"

"Clear enough."

"All right. You push along to the airfield now. I'll follow you down."

Tug went off.

Biggles gave him five minutes and then, putting on a fez, and throwing a native burnous over his shoulders, he walked down the road to the rendezvous, halting and squatting down, native fashion, in the deep shade on the western side of the Stellar hangar. Leaning back he settled down to watch.

He had not long to wait. Indeed, not more than two or three minutes had elapsed when Tug appeared, carrying a handkerchief loosely in his left hand. With him, engaged in conversation, were two men. One was the booking clerk.

The other was a short, fat, fussy little man, very well-dressed—too well-dressed Biggles thought—in a dark suit of European cut. A heavy black moustache was a conspicuous feature of his face. His complexion was so pale that at first, from a distance, Biggles took him to be a pure European; but as a result of a more prolonged scrutiny he changed his mind, and concluded that the smooth, olive—tinted skin was almost certainly that of a Eurasian, or at any rate a European with more than a trace of mid-eastern blood in his veins—a guess that was supported by the flash of a diamond tie-pin of a size so vulgar that no British visitor would be likely to wear it at such a time and place.

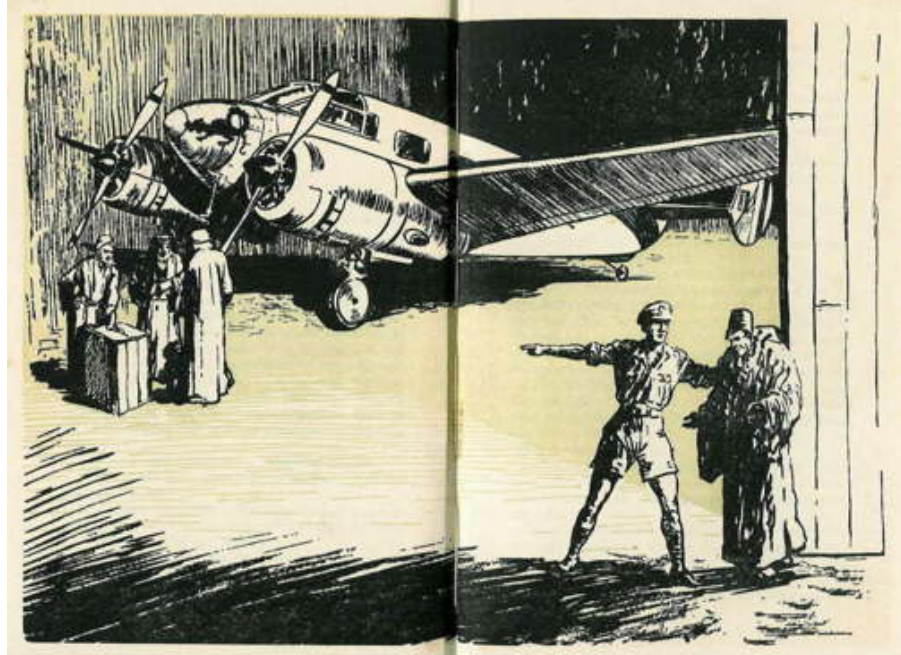
These details Biggles observed a lot faster than they can be written. His eyes returned to Tug, who, after casually blowing his nose, now allowed the handkerchief to fall at his feet. He did not pick it up, but after page 179

nodding as if in acknowledgement of an order, leaving the handkerchief where it had fallen, he walked briskly towards the hangar, some fifty yards away from the office.

This, according to the arranged signals, told Biggles that he was going to Kudinga, and that he was taking a passenger.

The first part of the information was satisfactory but the second, not so good. However, he wasted neither time nor energy deploring what could not be prevented.

Tug went on along the tarmac towards the gaping doors of the hangar. Biggles knew that he must have seen him, but he gave no sign. A glance revealed the clerk and his over-dressed companion still standing at the door of the office, engaged in earnest conversation. Biggles hesitated, and even while he hesitated, to his intense satisfaction, they went



inside. He was on his feet in a moment, and moved his position so that Tug would have to pass within a few yards of him.

Tug then appeared to notice him for the first time. "Hi! You!" he called in a peremptory voice, as if he took it for granted that Biggles was one of the company's employees. "What are you doing, loafing about there? Get inside and get busy." Then he added in a low voice, just loud enough for Biggles to hear, "It's White. I've got to fly him down to Kudinga. He's fed to the teeth about something. Talks as if he's a big shot." Then, raising his voice again, Tug said,

"Come on there, get a move on." He strode on into the hangar. Biggles followed.

The reason for the play-acting on Tug's part was at once apparent, for there were three native hands inside the hangar who must have been watching his approach. Tug shouted at them and they went about their several page 180

tasks. It took him only a few seconds to find them all jobs in the front part of the hangar. This of course was Biggles'

opportunity. He walked straight on down the full length of the Pacemaker that stood there, got quickly into the luggage compartment, which was aft of the main cabin, and settled himself as

comfortably as circumstances permitted.

"Okay," said Tug, walking up. With one hand on the handle of the door, but with his eyes on the native staff, he spoke softly and quickly.

"I don't know what's happened, but there seems to be a flap on—something to do with Ginger and Bertie I fancy. They know you're in Cairo. All routine services are suspended. White may be the big boss judging from the way Louis—

that's the booking clerk—runs round him. I reckon he's a Levantine in a big way of business. Fairly studded with diamonds, and reeks like a chemist's shop of scent and hair oil—makes you sick. Talks English all right, but with a funny sort of lisp that makes you wonder where he learnt it. First thing Louis said to me was, I had to take an important passenger to Kudinga right away. A minute later White turns up in a Rolls."

"Nothing said about anyone breaking into the office last night?"

"Not a word in front of me. Ivan, the chief pilot, is on his way here from Rome with another machine to collect a load of freight—the stuff you saw, I imagine and get it out of the way. White seems anxious to be rid of it."

"I'll bet he is," murmured Biggles drily. "How did you learn about this?"

"Heard Louis talking on the phone."

"I see. Good enough. You'd better push off now."

page 181

Is White going to sit with you or in the cabin?"

"I don't know—he hasn't said."

"No matter. If there should be any luggage to be put aboard handle it yourself or we've lost the trick."

"Okay." Tug slammed the door.

For the next ten minutes, at the end of which time the Pacemaker took off, events followed normal procedure. The machine was drawn up in front of the Stellar office for White to get aboard. White came out and said he would fly in front with Tug. He was followed by Louis carrying

a suitcase. Looking at the case Tug asked him what he was going to do with it.

"Put it in the luggage compartment," was the answer.

"Whose bag is it?"

"Mr. White's."

"Then it might as well go in the cabin where I can keep an eye on it," suggested Tug casually. "There's plenty of room."

"As you wish," agreed Louis, and handed Tug the bag.

Tug drew a deep breath and put it in the cabin. White climbed into the spare pilot's seat.

Tug was about to take his place when Louis beckoned.

The man seemed nervous. "Be very careful," he whispered. "Mr. White is an important director of the firm. There has been trouble and he is very, very upset. Only Ivan has flown him before, but Ivan is not here and he cannot wait. Take great care."

"I'll take care of him," promised Tug, with feeling. That was all. Five minutes later the machine was in the air, heading south through the crystal-clear atmosphere of early morning, with Tug at the stick, and Mr. White, looking singularly out of place, beside him.

During the long run to Kudinga little was said either by Tug or his passenger. For the most part White sat slumped in his seat, deep in thought, sometimes drumming on his knee, as if with impatience, with the finger of a fat white hand that had obviously never done a day's manual work. Tug had an almost overpowering desire to tear off an enormous solitaire diamond ring and throw it out of the window.

As they roared high over Aswan, White said: "Can't I you go faster than this? I do not like these machines they are not safe."

Answered Tug, trying not to show his contempt: "Sorry, but a plane will travel just as fast as its engines will take it, and no faster. I'm flying flat out now."

"Well, get there as fast as you can," ordered White curtly.

"I'm doing that already," returned Tug evenly. Just before noon, with

Kudinga creeping up over the skyline, White spoke again, giving voice, Tug thought from his manner, to something that had exercised his mind for some time.

"When we get to Kudinga there's a chance there may be trouble," said White. "I do not say there will be, but it is as well to be ready. Police spies have been there. One is there now. Others may come. I want you to stay near me all the time; then, if anything goes wrong we can get away—you understand? This aeroplane is mine so I have first call on it.

Never mind the others; they can take care of themselves. You obey my orders and when we get to Cairo you will not be sorry. It may not come to that. I mention it, in case. Do we understand each other? "

" Perfectly," answered Tug, trying to keep a sneer

page 183

out of his voice. His passenger's cold-blooded selfishness nearly made him sick.

Shortly after this they touched down on the dusty landing-ground. The machine had hardly finished its run when White jumped down, shouting to a steward who had run out to meet the machine, to bring along his suitcase.

Tug taxied on into the shade of the empty hangar.

He switched off and jumped down. There was no one there so he hurried along to the luggage compartment and opened the door a couple of inches.

"Okay," he told Biggles. "We're in the hangar. White's expecting trouble—offered me a bribe to stay by him and get him clear if a rumpus does start. I'm going along to see what's happening. I'll be back." With a wave he turned on his heel and hurried in the direction of the manager's office.

When he reached it he found the entire white staff of Kudinga assembled. White was talking volubly, waggging his hands as well as his tongue. Only Kreeze took any notice of Tug when he entered. In a quick aside he said: "What do you want here? "

"Mr. White ordered me to stand by in case I was wanted in a hurry,"

returned Tug imperturbably.

"That's right, so I did," put in White sharply, as if he resented the interruption. He went on to conclude what he was saying.

Tug leaned back against the door and lit a cigarette as if the matter under discussion was of no interest to him.

"I want to know what exactly is the position here," demanded White, looking at Kreeze as if he expected him to supply the information. "Have you caught this fellow Hebblethwaite ? "

page 184

"Not yet," admitted Kreeze—to Tug's unbounded satisfaction.

" Why not? "

" He can't be found," answered Kreeze, who seemed ill at ease. "We've had a dozen search parties out this morning looking for him," he went on. "I've had everyone out. I can only think that a lion got him; there were plenty in the wood last night, judging from the mess they made."

"Have you submerged the works?"

Tug of course had no idea what this meant, so he awaited Kreeze's reply with curiosity.

"It should have been done by now," replied Kreeze. " I sent Stephan and George down half an hour ago to do it. They should be back soon."

"And you are sure there is nothing left that might require explanation should we have visitors? "

"You need have no fear of that," asserted Kreeze. "The entire police forces of the world are welcome to search the place if they wish."

White drew a deep breath. "Well, that's something. Have you seen anything of Bigglesworth?"

"No. Is he about?" .

"He's been seen in Cairo. I thought he might have got here."

"That's impossible." Kreeze laughed unpleasantly. "I rather wish he would come. He'd find us waiting for him with open arms. I've got

men stationed on all the high ground, watching the sky—that's the way he'll come if he does come."

"Good. Be careful, though. He didn't get the reputation he's got for being shy—or a fool"

"I don't think there's any occasion for you to get alarmed, Mr. White," said Kreeze. "I'm quite capable page 185

of handling any situation that may arise here. What would you like me to do about the works?"

"They won't suffer any damage from submersion?"

"Oh no. The whole thing is watertight. When the pontoons are flooded the float will settle quietly on the bed of the lake. When the water is blown out of them by the introduction of air through the duct, operated by the engine, it will come up again. It will then be drawn in and made fast. I ordered it to be sunk about twenty yards from the shore; the water is plenty deep enough there to cover it. It will be no trouble at all to recover it when you decide that it is safe to do so."

What all this was about Tug was not entirely clear; but he had a vague idea of what had happened—or was happening.

He was waiting impatiently to hear more when there came an interruption which told him all he needed to know. The door was flung open and a man in mechanic's overalls literally burst in. He seemed to be on the border line of hysteria with excitement.

"He's inside!" he cried breathlessly.

"What are you talking about, George?" snapped Kreeze. "Who's inside what?"

"Hebblethwaite. He's in the works."

There was a brittle silence that lasted for perhaps two seconds. It was broken by White. "What's happened? Speak up, man," he requested sharply .

"We were ordered to submerge the works, sir," explained the man called George. "We uncoupled the float, pushed it out for about twenty yards, and had thrown the switch that operates the electric valves in the pontoons—"



"Didn't you look in the works first? " put in Kreeze. " No."

"Why not?"

"There seemed no reason—"

"Fool! Go on."

"The float had just started to settle nicely when there was a noise inside it. Then there was shooting—first three shots, then more."

By this time the atmosphere in the office was tense. "Go on—and what did you do? " snapped Kreeze. "We closed the valves again."

"Why?"

"Because we thought that if there had been shooting some of the bullets might have gone through the walls, in which case, when she went down the works would fill with water."

"Would that matter? " asked White. "Surely it would have been the easiest way to settle the fellow inside? "

"But if the float filled with water we should never get it up again."

"Not if you pumped air into the pontoons? " "That would probably make the whole thing turn turtle," declared George.

"I doubt if the pontoons hold enough air to lift the float if the upper part was full of water. I thought I'd better run up and report to Mr. Kreeze for instructions."

"Can the man inside get out?" asked White.

"No, sir. The float is awash and the water is full of crocodiles."

White drew a deep breath. "Then there's no reason to get upset. You can haul the float to the bank again if need be?"

"Yes, sir. If we pump air into the pontoons the float will right itself and become buoyant. We could then bring it in."

There's a wire cable as well as an air pipe-line connecting it with the engine room."

Although his head was spinning with this staggering news, and there might be more to come, Tug decided that he had heard enough. Questions were still being fired at the mechanic, who was the centre of interest, so he opened the door quietly and stepped out. He closed the door behind him, and then, casting caution to the winds, raced for the hangar.

When he reached it he found that Biggles had discarded his burnous and was squatting on an undercarriage wheel smoking a cigarette.

"I was watching for you," greeted Biggles. "What's the news?"

"Plenty," answered Tug crisply. "Listen to this."

In a short spate of words he gave Biggles an account of the situation in the power-house. "It must be Ginger inside,"

he concluded. "It couldn't be anyone else. They think so, anyway. We've got to get there first or he's sunk. The whole bunch will be down there presently."

Biggles got up and stamped on his cigarette. "Do you know the way to this place?" "Yes."

Biggles took out his automatic. "Got your gun?"

"You bet I have."

"Use it if anyone tries to stop us. Once we start we can't stop. Ready?"

"Yep."

"Is anyone about outside?"

Tug took a quick look. "All clear."

"Fine," said Biggles. "Let's go."

They went out into the hot sunshine and set off at a run for the gate in the wire.

## Chapter 16

### A Tight Corner

The race for the power-house began well—better, in fact, than Biggles

had dared to hope. They entered the lodge grounds, passed the lodge itself, and were well on their way down the hill towards the gate which gave access to the wire corridor that led to the power-house, before they saw a soul. Then Tug noticed that some blacks, in their own compound outside the wire, were watching them curiously. He made a remark to this effect to Biggles, who did not stop, or even look round, but ran on to the gate. Tug was afraid that it might have been closed and locked, but as he hoped, it had been left open by George in his hurry to get to Kreeze.

At the gate Tug pulled up for a moment, pointing. "That's the powerhouse," he told Biggles. "Ginger's in the part you can see in the water—the float, they call it. It's anchored by a cable to the engine room on the bank."

"There's a man down there," observed Biggles. "That must be Stephen," answered Tug. "It was George who came up."

"So much the better. We may need someone to show us how to operate the valves and haul the thing in," said Biggles, as they went on.

Very soon, as they ran, they could hear a violent hammering going on inside the float; and the reason for this became apparent when the butt of a rifle burst

page 189

through what appeared to be a shuttered window. It was withdrawn, but appeared again.

"Looks like Ginger's trying to hammer a hole in the wall to get out," panted Tug. "He's getting on, too, by the looks of it," he went on, as a hand appeared in the opening made by the rifle.

Then some muffled shots were heard. The rifle butt burst through again. A piece of the window frame was detached and fell into the water.

"Ginger's putting in some hard work," muttered Biggles.

"So should I, shut up in that rat trap with crocs outside," returned Tug grimly.

By this time they were within thirty yards of their objective. The mechanic, Stephan, who had of course seen them coming, got up to

meet them. His manner suggested that he was puzzled, but not alarmed. Nevertheless, it was natural that he should look with askance at the automatic as Biggles and Tug ran up. He opened his mouth to speak, but Tug forestalled him.

"I'm Mr. White's pilot," he said quickly, and truthfully enough. "He's here. I was with him in the office when George came in. He's liable to bite your ear off over this business."

"But what—? "

"Don't argue. He wants to talk to that guy in the float. He sent me down to say you're to get it on an even keel and haul it in. Jump to it—he'll be here any minute."

The mechanic did not question the order. After all, there was no reason why he should suspect for one moment that the two men who had just come down from the lodge were police officers. Without a word he went into the engine room, turned a key and pulled a lever.

page 190

A dynamo whirred. A steel drum began to revolve, winding a cable on itself.

Biggles, watching from the outside, saw the float begin to rise in the water, and at the same time move towards the place where he stood. Suddenly Ginger recognized him and let out a yell, but Biggles motioned him to be silent.

Stephan came out, and with the others stood watching the float creep slowly towards the bank.

"That man inside—he has a gun. He may be dangerous," said Stephan, speaking with a stilted foreign accent.

"Leave him to me," returned Biggles significantly, tapping his pistol.

So far things had gone without a hitch, but Biggles knew that this could hardly be expected to continue. The progress of the float towards the bank was painfully slow. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the path leading to the lodge, and a minute later he was not surprised to see a group of men run into view. Some were running fast, some not so fast, with the result that by the time they reached the gate in the fence they were strung out. Biggles noted that they were

all white men. But now, behind them, appeared a score or more of blacks, a few carrying rifles, but most of them brandishing spears. They ran so fast that they rapidly overhauled the white men.

Stephan, of course, had seen what the others had seen, and now for the first time he appeared to become suspicious.

His eyes, parted only by a frown, went from Biggles to Tug, and back to Biggles. His body stiffened.

"Who are you?" he asked in a high-pitched voice, as his suspicions mounted rapidly.

page 191

"You'll learn," answered Biggles evenly.

Shouts that carried a warning now floated down from the oncoming crowd. Stephan, his eyes darting from Tug to Biggles, began to back away. His right hand went to his hip pocket.

The muzzle of Biggles' gun, held low, jerked up. "Take it easy," he warned. "Don't try anything silly."

Stephan drew a deep breath. "Cops, eh?" he rasped, understanding leaping into his eyes.

"You've got it, brother," Tug told him without emotion.

The mechanic made a desperate leap for the powerhouse door, either with the intention of taking cover, or switching off the dynamo, or both. In either case Biggles dare not risk it happening. He had given a warning. There was no need to repeat it. His automatic cracked, spurting flame.

Stephan swayed, stumbled, collided with the engine room wall and clawed at it with one hand while the other dragged at a revolver half in and half out of his pocket. ...

Biggles' lips came together in a thin line. Again he raised the pistol. But before he could fire the mechanic had lurched sideways; he missed his footing, and with a scream of mortal fear fell with a terrific splash into the lake.

Biggles ran to the spot, but before he could do anything there was a vicious swirl. A great gnarled tail broke surface for a moment before

gliding into the depths. Of Stephan there was no sign. Only ripples marked the spot where he had disappeared. They lapped gently on the shore.

Biggles turned pale but said nothing. What had happened was all too plain.

page 192



"You've had it, chum," breathed Tug, still staring at the spot. "But you certainly asked for it."

A shot rang out and a bullet smacked against the power-house. Biggles glanced quickly up the track and saw that the blacks were dangerously close. "You'll have to hold them off, Tug, while I get Ginger out," he ordered, clipping his words. "Shoot straight up the corridor—that should steady them. They can't get out of it and they've no cover." Then, to Ginger, whose head and shoulders were projecting from the side of the float, now close in, he called: "Is that hole big enough for you to get through?"

"Just about," answered Ginger.

"All right. Wait till she touches. Don't on any account slip into the water."

"Not on your life," returned Ginger fervently. "I know what's there."

Bullets were now coming unpleasantly close, although fortunately the shooting, as a whole, was wild, this being due probably to the harassing fire kept up by Tug. The blacks, refusing to face it without cover, had thrown themselves flat in the longish grass near the wire, each trying to get behind the next man. It was evident that they had no stomach for their job. Nor, for that matter, had their white masters, who seemed equally disinclined to advance. Biggles, too old a soldier to expose himself unnecessarily, was lying flat. He ordered Tug to do the same.

The float touched the bank. Ginger wriggled through the gaping hole he had made in the bent and battered shutter, staggered to the bank and threw himself behind a convenient stump. Another head and shoulders filled the aperture.

Ginger, who happened to be looking at Biggles, saw the blood drain from his face. Twice page 193

Biggles opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came. His lips remained parted. The expression in his eyes made Ginger turn sharply to see what he was staring at.

Bertie was just climbing out of the window.

Biggles pointed. "Who—who's that?" he asked in a voice cracking with incredulity.

Ginger answered: "Bertie."

"But I thought ... "

Then Ginger realized that Tug had told Biggles of what he had seen in the forest; in short, that Bertie was dead.

"Bertie's all right," he explained quickly. "Absolutely," confirmed Bertie, joining Ginger behind the stump. "But, I say, what a time we're having, you know!"

Tug had spun round at the sound of Bertie's voice.

He, like Biggles, went pale. His eyes goggled. He nearly choked. When

he could find his voice his first remark sounded foolish. "What are you doing here? " he gabbled incoherently. "You went for a Burton. I saw you."

"Changed my mind, old boy," answered Bertie, polishing his eyeglass with a wisp of dry grass.

"You dirty dog!"

"Dirty is the word," agreed Bertie in a melancholy voice. "I'm filthy. Don't come near me. I stink. My pants are flyblown—"

"Quit fooling," cut in Biggles. "This is the showdown and as far as I'm concerned it's a bit premature. Things are serious. Watch what you're doing. Is there any ammo in that rifle of yours, Ginger? "

"Yes. I've just charged the magazine, but, that's the lot," answered Ginger. "It took almost all the cartridges I had to shoot a ring of holes round the shutter so that we could bash a way out."

193

"Where's Bertie's rifle?"

"The last time I saw it, it was lying up in the wood."

"What happened to Bertie? Tug told me he'd been gored by a buffalo."

"That was a frame-up to trick Kreeze."

While this conversation was taking place in crisp sentences they had not been lying still. Automatically each one had wormed his way to the best cover he could find, facing up the wire corridor, the direction from which an attack must come. More than once this looked like developing when some of the blacks goaded by taunts shouted by Kreeze, advanced a few yards.

"How are we fixed for weapons? " asked Biggles. The answer was soon forthcoming—one rifle, two revolvers and two automatics, with not much ammunition for any of them.

Biggles' next question was addressed to Ginger. "Do you know your way about here?"

"More or less."

"What's our best plan? Things can't go on indefinitely as they are. If



the enemy sends for tools to cut through the fence and work round to our flanks, we've had it."

There seemed to be a chance of this happening, for some of the blacks sprang suddenly to their feet and went racing back up the path.

"The only real cover where we could make a stand is the forest on our right," explained Ginger. "Of course, there's always the power-house."

"I don't like the idea of being cooped up in there," replied Biggles.

"Once inside, there would be no getting out, and we're in no state to stand a siege. Besides, one spark on that thatched roof and the place  
page 195

would go up in flames. That would finish us. Has anyone anything in the way of rations?"

"No."

"Then that settles that," decided Biggles. "Give me a minute to think things over. Meantime, make a dash into the power-house and wreck the plant. Keep your head down as you go. If we smash the engine they won't be able to sink the float. What's in it, by the way?"

"Printing machinery, paper and dud notes."

"Ah!"

"We were inside having a look round when Kreeze decided to sink the thing," explained Ginger. "Of course we didn't know then that it could be submerged. I've got some specimen notes in my pocket."

"Good. Go and sabotage the engine."

Ginger made a dash, and presently the crash of metal on metal told the others that he was doing his job with enthusiasm.

"I say, old boy, where's Algy?" Bertie asked Biggles.

"Gone back to London to report to Raymond."

"Lucky blighter." . .

Biggles looked at his watch and saw that the time was one-thirty. More of the blacks were now making a cautious withdrawal up the path. Occasionally one of those who remained would fire a shot, without doing any damage.

"This is the lull before the storm," Biggles told the others. "If we're going to do anything it will have to be now. Kreeze and Co. are not just going to leave us here. By the way, I seem to remember that someone said there are some genuine hunters staying at the lodge. They might make useful allies. Where are they now?"

page 196

"There's a British colonel and two Americans" answered Ginger. "They will have gone out hunting and I don't suppose they'll be back before dark."

"I see. How did you and Bertie get here? Did you come down the path ? "

"No. There's a gap in the fence in the forest where a tree has fallen across it. I don't think Kreeze can know anything about it or he would have had it repaired."

Biggles thought for a moment. "If that is so they must suppose we are penned in here."

"I imagine so. Why? Have you got an idea?"

"I was trying to get the position lined up," replied Biggles. "We can't take on this bunch single-handed in a straight fight. There are too many blacks, and we haven't enough ammunition, anyway. Moreover, we can't live without eating, and I'm about due for a meal. These factors alone mean that our only chance is to get out—if we can. There's only one way of getting clear and that's in the machine Tug brought down. I was thinking that if we could get up to this gap you're talking about we might work round behind the enemy and grab the aircraft without any opposition. That should be possible if they suppose we are still inside the fence somewhere, even though they can't see us. There's no need for us to stay at Kudinga any longer; we've got all the evidence we need for Raymond to pounce on the whole gang."

Incidentally, he should have that information by now. With the power unit smashed Kreeze won't be able to move the printing outfit. Without a plane they can't get away from here, so they should still be about when we come back with reinforcements. Our plan is to get away if we can. How does that strike everyone?"

page 197

It was unanimously agreed that this was the best thing to do in the circumstances.

"All right, let's try it," decided Biggles. "The great thing is not to let the enemy know we're moving. The easiest way of leading him to think that we are still here is for someone to stay behind for a bit and fire an occasional shot. Bertie, do you know your way up to the gap? "

"Do I not!" exclaimed Bertie.

"Good. This will be the order, then. Ginger will take us up to the track in the forest. You stay here for ten minutes or so firing an occasional shot, then join us on the track. We'll wait there for you."

"Right you are, old boy," agreed Bertie.

Biggles turned to Ginger. "Off you go; we'll follow."

"Watch out for snakes," warned Ginger. "This place is reported to be stiff with them, but so far I've only seen one."

Keeping flat, he wormed his way to the ample cover provided by the bamboos. Biggles and Tug followed, leaving Bertie to cover the retreat.

In daylight it took only a matter of twenty minutes or so to reach the gap in the wire, and a quarter of an hour later they were on the track, reaching it at the scene of the buffalo tragedy, of which there remained gruesome evidence in the shape of trampled earth and well—picked bones. A cloud of flies hung over the place. A disappointment awaited Ginger, who hoped to find Bertie's rifle still there. But it had gone, having been taken presumably by one of the search parties.

"This is where Bertie was supposed to have had it," he told Biggles, and while they were waiting for Bertie he gave a fuller account of the ruse. He apologized

page 198

again to Tug for the distress the picture had caused him.

"You'd have been taken in, too," remarked Tug. I never saw a man look more dead than Bertie did, lying there smothered with blood."

"It was buffalo blood," said Ginger. "He slipped and fell in it—made a

shocking mess of his breeches, which still worries him not a little." He smiled at the recollection.

Soon afterwards Bertie joined them. He recognized the spot and shuddered. "How perfectly foul," he uttered in a voice of deep disgust. "Couldn't you find some other place to wait? Must we stay here?"

"No," answered Biggles. "The faster we move now the better. If we get caught in the open it will be anything but funny. How far is it to the hangar?" Ginger supplied the information. "Not far. We ought to do it in ten minutes or so."

"All right; let's turn up the wick."\*

They set off again, marching in single file with Ginger, who knew the way, leading. There was no more talking and they moved with the least possible noise.

The edge of the forest was reached without incident. Ahead now lay the open rim of the crater, with the sun blazing down on it at full mid-day strength. The rarefied air quivered in the heat.

"Keep going," ordered Biggles, and the party proceeded.

They had gone more than half way, and their objective was in full view, when without warning two blacks appeared directly ahead. They may have been watchers sent up by Kreeze, or, as Tug remarked, remembering

\* "Turn up the wick." R.A.F. slang meaning hurry, or more technically, open the throttle wide.

page 199

the conversation in the office, they could have been two of the men posted to watch the sky. Anyway, they saw the four white men instantly, as was inevitable. With a yell of alarm they dashed over the brow of the hill whence they had appeared.

"I'm afraid that's torn it," muttered Biggles. "In a couple of minutes Kreeze will know where we are. He'll guess we're making for the hangar. Our only chance is to beat him to it. Come on." He broke into a run.

With perspiration streaming down their faces they ran straight for the

objective; and they were within a hundred yards of it, with every prospect of success, when a dozen or more blacks appeared, urged on by Doctor Dorov, from behind the hangar. Biggles realized that they had come out of the lodge grounds and had been approaching the hangar at the same time as themselves, but from the far side.

Biggles slowed down. "I should have guessed that the first thing Kreeze would do, now that he knows Tug is with us, would be to put a guard on the machine," he observed. "Pity; another couple of minutes and we should have been there first."

"When he saw four of us down at the power-house he must have realized that you were here," Ginger pointed out.

"He must have been a bit puzzled to see me trotting round again—if you get my meaning?" remarked Bertie, wiping moisture off his monocle.

At this juncture Kreeze himself appeared over the edge of the crater, slightly to the left, and rather nearer to the hangar than they were. With him was White, Robinson and George the mechanic, and the remainder of the black staff.

page 200

By this time Biggles' party, confronted by overwhelming numbers, had automatically stopped. In fact, all three parties stopped, since to go on must provoke a collision which, since they were all in the open, could not fail to result in casualties. In fact, the situation, as it had developed, was a curious one. Neither Kreeze nor Doctor Dorov, in charge of the two opposition parties, appeared anxious to open hostilities—possibly because they themselves would certainly be involved. As far as Kreeze was concerned, practical proof of this was provided when he produced a white handkerchief, and waving it conspicuously advanced to within speaking distance—or perhaps it would be more correct to say, shouting distance. Each party was about fifty yards from the hangar and the same distance apart.

"You might as well give up!" called Kreeze. "You can't get away!"

"Neither can you," Biggles pointed out with even greater truth, for the only vehicle available was the aircraft, and Kreeze on his side had no one able to fly it.

"Put down your guns and come into the office to talk it over," suggested Kreeze.

Biggles laughed scornfully. "Put down your guns and I'll take you to Cairo for a fair trial," he promised. "Are you coming quietly or would you rather fight it out?"

"You can't dictate to me," jeered Kreeze.

"Have it your own way," answered Biggles. Kreeze rejoined his companions.

Biggles was watching him closely. "Watch out! " he warned tersely. "This is where they'll start something." Then, as several blacks suddenly ran back

page 201

below the lip of the crater, he went on, "He's sent them to try to work round behind us." Kreeze and the other white men also backed to the lip of the crater, and then dropped down out of sight. Biggles lay flat. "They're aiming to shoot at us from cover," he observed. "Keep your heads down."

A moment later three shots rang out. The bullets whistled but did no harm. Dorov, too, fired a quick shot. Then, taking his blacks with him he ran to a position that put the hangar between them—where, of course, Biggles could no longer see him.

"This is going to be a warm spot presently," observed Tug.

"Don't waste ammunition, anybody," was all Biggles had to say.

An attentive lull fell.

"Now listen, everybody," said Biggles presently. "We can't stay here. Those blacks are working round behind us and we shall soon be surrounded. Our only chance is the machine, and there's only one way to get it. We've got to be inside that hangar within a minute or we're sunk. Once we start, don't stop. One of us ought to get through. The main thing is to get word back home about this rat's nest. Wait till I give the word then go straight for the hangar. Hark!

What's that? "

From far away, faint as yet, came the drone of an aircraft.

"I imagine that will be Ivan their chief pilot," said Tug. "He's expected here."

"In a Pacemaker?" asked Biggles.

"I reckon so."

"The machine I can hear is a heavier job than that," asserted Biggles.  
"It takes at least four engines to set page 202

up—watch out, I've got an idea those blacks are trying to make up their minds to charge."

A number of natives near the hangar were being incited by Doctor Dorov; but they, too, had heard the aircraft, and hesitated. Indeed, no doubt because it was likely to affect the situation, everyone waited, watching the sky. When the aircraft came into sight, flying low and very fast, it was greeted by cries of alarm on one side and jubilation on the other.

"It's a Bombay!" shouted Ginger. "And here comes another by all that's wonderful!" he added as a second Bombay came roaring over the skyline.

Biggles eyed the machines critically. "There must be an exercise on," he opined. "No matter; if they land here they'll give us a lucky break."

With the appearance of the big machines the entire situation changed abruptly. As Tug remarked a minute later, it was a mystery where everyone went. Even the blacks seemed to know the meaning of the R.A.F. markings, and taking fright they fled incontinently towards the forest.

"Amazing what a little red white and blue can still do, by Jove!" remarked Bertie, a suspicion of esprit de corps warming his voice.

"Could Algy have anything to do with this?" suggested Ginger.

"No. He hasn't had time to get back from England," declared Biggles. "Raymond, of course, could have got in touch with R.A.F. Headquarters, Middle East, through the Air Ministry, or the Police Department here through Scotland Yard. By jingo! They are going to land! "

As the first of the two machines touched down Biggles rose cautiously and looked round. The others 202

did the same. Everyone had vanished. But the landing area did not for

long remain abandoned. Hardly had the machine stopped moving when the cabin door opened and a file of uniformed men, following closely one behind the other, jumped out.

"Egyptian police," observed Biggles. "Then the Air Commodore must have fixed it. This can only be a co-operation job between the service and the police. Hello! There's Major Grattan, the fellow who helped us in Cairo. I warned him that he might be busy shortly." Biggles advanced to meet the police officer, whose men, fourteen in all, were being paraded quickly by a sergeant.

"Glad to see you," greeted Biggles. "You were just about in time. Things were getting warmish. What good fairy sent you here ? "

" A signal from the Foreign Office. We got orders to mop this place up."

"It can do with it," asserted Biggles, lighting a cigarette.

"What's going on here, anyway? " questioned the Major.

Biggles explained. "There's no desperate hurry," he concluded. "Without transport I don't see how any of them can get away. Be careful, though, some of the blacks are American gangsters masquerading as natives."

" Thanks," acknowledged the Major. "We may as well make a start. Are you coming along? "

" I, personally, am going to have a bath before I do anything else," put in Bertie definitely.

By this time the second machine had landed, and was disembarking a fresh contingent of police.

" As a matter of fact we could all do with a wash and

page 204

a drink," said Biggles. "You seem to have plenty of men, Major. You don't really need us, do you?"

"Well, you'd be useful," answered the Major. "Still, go and have a drink and join us when you're ready. We'll make a start."

"Fair enough," agreed Biggles. "You can't go wrong if you pick up everyone you can find—bar a British colonel named Dupray and two



American sportssmen who are out shooting."

He walked on to the lodge.

## Chapter 17

### Buttoned Up

Biggles did not linger, nor did he allow the others to waste time, over the refreshments to which they presently helped themselves in the dining-room of the abandoned lodge. Sporadic shooting outside, sometimes near and sometimes distant, aroused his curiosity, and suggested that not all of the gang were submitting tamely to arrest. Even Bertie, who had a quick bath and change, in his relief at getting into clean linen announced that he was ready to start all over again.

They were only about half an hour in the lodge, yet when they went out and joined Major Grattan it was to learn that the operation was practically complete.

Kreeze and Robinson had been caught, and after a struggle overpowered and disarmed. They were now in Kreeze's office, handcuffed and under guard. Doctor Dorov had been mortally wounded resisting arrest.

illustration

page 205

Before he died he boasted that as he was on the list of Nazi war criminals he had cheated the Allies after all. Originally a Czech banker of repute, he had turned quisling, and as head of the Nazi forgery and counterfeit document department during the war, he had ill-treated prisoners who happened in civil life to be engravers, draughtsmen, and the like, who refused to work for him. Stephan and George had been two of his associates at that time.

White, Major Grattan said, was hiding somewhere in the bamboo swamp. There was no fear of him getting away.

George had last been seen making off across the plain with some natives. There was little chance of his reaching civilization. For the rest, the entire staff had been rounded up. Two American negro gangsters, disguised as African natives, had been killed in a gun fight. Three policemen had been wounded, but none seriously; first aid

treatment had been given, and they would be all right until such time as they could be flown back to Egypt.

"We'd better see about getting White out of that swamp, then we can all go home," suggested Biggles.

"He can't get far; I've got men all round the place," stated Major Grattan.

"Why didn't you send them in after him? "

"A cornered rat will always fight and I want to avoid casualties if I can," replied the Major. "If he doesn't come out soon we shall have to go in and drag him out."

"There's reason to suppose that he's the Big Noise behind this outfit," remarked Biggles. "Why mess about until it suits him to do something? I want to go home, but I don't like leaving while he's still at large. Let's go and get him."

page 206

"All right," agreed the Major.

Biggles set off down the slope followed by the others.

Reaching the bamboos he ordered the rest to wait, and revolver in hand, treading softly, went on alone for a short distance into the thicket. He halted and listened. Not a sound broke the steamy, sultry silence.

"White!" he called impatiently. "You can't get away. You might as well pack up."

A voice answered from somewhere quite near, answered in a harsh whisper pregnant with urgency and fear. "Is that you, Bigglesworth? " it said.

"Yes, it's me," answered Biggles. "I want you."

"Listen," came the voice again. "I'll give you ten thousand pounds to get me out of this."

"You're talking to the wrong man," returned Biggles curtly. "Come on."

"Fifty thousand."

"You're wasting your time. Are you coming out or do I have to fetch you? "

The answer was a stream of blasphemous abuse.

There was a sudden swishing of the bamboos, the sound receding.

Biggles started in pursuit, but before he had taken half a dozen paces he was brought to a halt by a sudden commotion immediately in front of him. Above a crashing and threshing of undergrowth rose a scream of such mortal terror that a prickly sensation ran down his spine. Hastening forward, quickly but cautiously, he raised his gun, half expecting a trick; but this fear was cast aside when, after taking a few more paces he was confronted by a spectacle so appalling that for a moment he could only stand as if petrified with horror.

page 207

White was rolling about on the ground apparently trying to tear to pieces with his hands a fat, loathsome puff-adder that had fastened its fangs in the calf of his leg. Scream after scream cracked from his lips as he threw himself this way and that, striving to tear the writhing creature from him. Once he managed to break its hold, but the respite was short-lived, for it fastened again to his hand.

There was nothing Biggles could do, for to shoot the snake in the only vital place, the head, without hitting the man, was practically impossible. To use his hands was to invite the same fate as White. Still, he did what he could.

Snatching up a length of dead bamboo he went as close as he dare, and waiting for a chance brought it down with a vicious swipe across the snake's body. The blow broke its back and caused it to release its hold. He struck it again and again until its movements were sluggish and then blew its head to pieces with a close shot. By this time White was lying on his back moaning feebly.

The others, who had heard the commotion, ran up. A glance was enough to tell them what had happened.

"Watch where you're walking," warned Biggles crisply. "There may be more snakes about. White's had it. He hasn't a chance. Let's get him out of this."

Lifting the stricken man between them, not without difficulty for he was a dead weight, they carried him to the open space in front of the

power-house, where Major Grattan, with experience of such accidents, did everything possible.

Having sent a man to the lodge for permanganate of potash, with scant ceremony he cut away White's clothing to expose the fang marks, and

page 208

then laid open the flesh with his knife until the blood ran. With the help of the others he dragged him to his feet and tried to keep him moving. But it was no use. White never spoke again. By the time the runner had returned from the lodge with the permanganate he had breathed his last.

"Well, that's how it goes," observed Biggles philosophically. He noticed that the Major was staring at White's face with an extraordinary expression on his own. "What's on your mind?" he asked.

The Major pointed at the dead man. "What did you say he called himself?"

"White."

"In Egypt he is known as Kravas—an Armenian," stated the Major. "I know him well by sight. He has the reputation of being one of the wealthiest men in the Middle East. He keeps up a magnificent place in Cairo."

Biggles smiled faintly. "Now you know how he made his money," he observed drily. "I'll leave you to dispose of the body. It's time I pushed along back to Cairo to see what's happening there. No doubt you'll be coming back yourself presently. I'll see you then. So-long."

It had turned eleven o'clock that night when the Pacemaker which they had used for the journey, touched its wheels on the dusty Egyptian airfield.

Hurrying to the Stellar office they discovered two policemen on duty. Biggles showed his pass. Inside they found Algy, Air Commodore Raymond, and a number of officials, some busy packing the paper contents of files and drawers into bags, and others

page 209

examining with interest a number of trophies that lay about the floor, having been cut open to reveal their contents.

Their arrival, they learned, was expected, for Major Grattan had been in radio communication with his headquarters to make a preliminary report of what had happened at Kudinga. He had said that Biggles and his party were on their way to Cairo.

"How's everything at this end?" asked Biggles, after greetings had been exchanged.

"Buttoned up to the last button," answered the Air Commodore with a satisfaction he made no attempt to conceal.

"You certainly threw the monkey wrench into this set of gears. What puzzles me is how you hit on the right track straight away."

Biggles shrugged. "It wasn't as difficult as it may sound. After all, aviation is still a young business and we old hands know most of the people in it. By making a list of possibles, and then striking out those that I knew from personal association must be on the level, I wasn't faced with much ground to cover."

The Air Commodore nodded. "Yes, I can see that angle. Well, you'll be glad to know that we've made a clean job. As soon as I heard Algy Lacey's story I decided to take action right away. I don't mind admitting that I was a bit worried about you charging into the lion's den with your usual disregard for danger, and my first move was to take steps to get you out of it. I asked the A.O.C. Middle East to co-operate with the local police and get cracking."

"I guessed as much," murmured Biggles lighting a cigarette. "The relief party couldn't have arrived at a better moment."

Things were getting decidedly awkward when we heard the old familiar drone of the page 210

Bombays. By the way, Ginger has some samples of the stuff they were printing at Kudinga, hot off the press. But tell me, what's happened here?"

"I made contact with the Continental police with the result that every agency, booking office and taxiderrnist distributing centre was raided simultaneously. We found some interesting stuff at this so-called pilots' club at Croydon.

We've got Black. We soon located the machines, and the company's pilots, including Ivan, were arrested as they landed. In fact, I don't see how anyone, including the small fry, can slip through the net. Once Major Grattan gave us the name of the Big Fish, Kravas, over the radio, the rest was easy. We went up to his palatial residence and had a look at hings, taking Louis, the booking clerk here, with us. He lost his nerve completely and decided to turn King's Evidence. It seems that he's a nephew of Kravas and knows all the ins and outs. He showed us his uncle's secret depository. In it we found, amongst other hings, a complete filing system of everyone employed by him, not only in the Stellar concern, but in the other nasty, if less spectacular, rackets that he runs. No wonder the man was a millionaire. But I mustn't stand talking now. I've got a lot of clearing up to do and it's going to take time."

"In that case you won't be needing us again for a bit? "

"I shall want your report as soon as you can let me have it, and later on, your evidence."

"I'll see to it," promised Biggles. "Meanwhile since we are here, and it's winter at home, we might as well make the best of the sunshine for a day or two."

"That's okay with me," consented the Air Commodore.

"Definitely okay with me, too. Time I got the old skin cleaned up a bit," declared Bectie, polishing his monocle briskly.

"Suits me," murmured Ginger.





























"And me," agreed Algy.

"I'm not grouching," averred Tug.



Biggles smiled. "Okay. Let's go."



# Document Outline

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